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# How Effective Leaders Learn from Life: A Grounded Theory Study of the Impact of Significant Life Experiences Upon Leadership Development

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HOW EFFECTIVE LEADERS LEARN FROM LIFE: A GROUNDED THEORY  
STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF SIGNIFICANT LIFE EXPERIENCES ON  
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

by

Ryan P. Meers

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Human Sciences (Leadership Studies)

Under the Supervision of Professor Leverne Barrett

Lincoln, Nebraska

November, 2009

# HOW EFFECTIVE LEADERS LEARN FROM LIFE: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF SIGNIFICANT LIFE EXPERIENCES ON LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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University of Nebraska, 2009

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Fifteen effective leaders from diverse organizational backgrounds described their significant life experiences and the impact upon their development as leaders. Using grounded theory methodology, a theoretical model emerged for assisting leaders absorb greater learning from their various life experiences. Related to the central phenomenon of how effective leaders learn from significant life experiences, four causal conditions of types of experiences were identified as influencing how leaders learn: (1) experiences of adversity or loss; (2) experiences of “stretch assignments”; (3) inspirational experiences; and (4) experiences with conflict. Strategies used by the leaders to absorb learning from their significant experiences were active reflection and seeking to apply the lessons learned for their own leadership as well as to help others. Intervening conditions and conditions pertaining to the context of the learning experiences were also identified through the data. Several consequences or outcomes of leaders’ significant life experiences were also identified through the data: (1) consideration of others; (2) self-awareness; (3) resiliency; (4) change; (5) embracing of life; (6) confidence; and (7) humility.

Six propositions emerged from the data: (1) the influence of family plays a significant role in the response of leaders to life experiences; (2) learning from significant life experiences provides a valuable foundation of case-based knowledge that leaders can utilize in times of uncertainty and change; (3) significant life experiences can serve as the trigger point for the development of Authentic Leadership; (4) significant life experiences can provide a means for developing Emotional Intelligence within leaders; (5) the strategy of reflection used by leaders in significant life experiences can be utilized as an effective learning tool in leadership development; and (6) significant life experiences, as

related in this study, may serve as means to develop the Servant Leadership characteristics of altruistic calling, emotional healing and wisdom.

## Dedication

One of the discoveries in my research was the powerful role that families play in influencing effective leaders and how they learn from significant life experiences. I dedicate this work to several members of my family who have played a key role in my finishing the course as well as making the most of this significant life experience.

I owe both of my parents an amazing debt that can never be repaid. My dad, the now “Senior” Dr. Meers, has truly been my inspiration to continue this path of continuous learning and education. He has been an example to me of a great father and a great teacher and friend to students; I hope to be like him someday. My mom, Janet, deserves a very special award as she has now helped put a husband and a son through doc school. Her constant encouragement to me not to give up as well as to never let my education go to my head is invaluable. To dad and mom, I love you both more than you can ever know.

My four children have truly been amazing throughout this journey and I’m looking forward to having much more time to spend with them all now. Justin, Amanda, Caleb and Jocelyn you all have been very patient with daddy and now we will have a lot more time for wrestling matches and playing “buck-buck.”

The greatest debt I owe is to my truly amazing and wonderful wife. When she agreed to marry me, I’m sure she never imagined what she was getting herself into. Debbie, thank you for your patience, your encouragement, your support and listening to me ramble on about my studies, especially as you took on more than your share of the household work. You are amazing and I love you so very much.

## Acknowledgements

I thank God, Who has enabled me to faithfully pursue this calling. He truly has been faithful in completing the good work which He began in me (Phil 1:6).

Beyond my family there are many people to whom I wish to say thank you for helping me along this journey. I want to thank my adviser and friend, Dr. Leverne Barrett, for all of his help and patience. Dr. Barrett is truly a friend to students and has consistently sought to help make me successful. I will truly miss our discussions and discoveries together as we spent the hours in your office. I also wish to thank the other members of my advisory committee: Dr. Gina Matkin, Dr. Susan Fritz and Dr. Reece Peterson. Each of them contributed to my success and I am truly thankful to each one.

I also want to thank my team mates in Leadership Development at State Farm: DeAnn Jaworski, Jeanie Farley, Shari Sanne, Mark Hernandez, Jeanie Cole, Laura Grosse Zitzer, Teresa McCarthy, Betty McCracken and Sharon Bradley. You have put up with my endless talking about the process and each of you have been a huge encouragement to me, thank you so much for your support.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction to the Study

#### *Introduction and Statement of the Problem*

It would seem, based on historical writings, legends, artifacts and other forms of evidence, that humanity has been interested with the study of leaders and leadership for thousands of years. From the earliest writings of the Bible in the Middle East to Aristotle and Plato in ancient Greece to Lao-Tzu in China, leaders and leadership have been studied and various theories have been proposed and debated. Based upon the volumes that have been written regarding leaders and leadership, it appears that two general questions are continually asked and have yet to be satisfactorily answered:

- 1) What is leadership? and
- 2) How do leaders develop? or From where do leaders come?

#### *Defining Leadership*

In spite of the long history of leadership studies, to this day there is not one generally accepted definition of leadership. Throughout the twentieth century many scholars presented varying models or theories of leadership, unfortunately they often did not provide a definition of leadership in their writings. Joseph Rost (1991) reviewed volumes of leadership research and writings from 1910 through the early 1990's, and found that less than 40 percent of the authors provided a definition for leadership or leader. In fact while many were presenting their theories or models, they also were attempting to put qualifying labels on leadership such as business leadership, educational leadership or political leadership. It seemed as if these authors were indicating that leadership was practiced differently in each of these settings or that leadership was only

practiced in their chosen areas (Rost, 1991). While this allows some freedom and flexibility to researchers to study this phenomenon that we call “leadership” from a variety of perspectives it is somewhat disconcerting as it also allows for an overly liberal or conversely excessively narrow view of leadership.

While many scholars did not provide an exact definition of leadership, Rost (1991) found that those who did as well as those who did not wrote with a definition in mind. The “industrial paradigm” is the term Rost (1991) uses for the paradigm from which the majority of leadership researchers and authors have written. In essence the industrial paradigm is a blending of management and leadership and is primarily focused on the achievement of results or accomplishing a goal. This view of leadership arose out of the Industrial Revolution and continued to be a major paradigm for leaders throughout the 20th century, particularly in American culture.

One author who saw the need to shift away from this view of leadership and to further explore what he termed a “moral leadership” was James MacGregor Burns. In his 1978 book, *Leadership*, Burns presented his now famous theory of the transactional and transformational leader. Burns (1978) argued that most “leadership” was of the transactional variety, in which leaders engaged in a relationship of exchange with followers. However, he saw the potential of leaders engaging followers in a relationship in which both parties helped to raise the other to achieve “higher levels of motivation and morality;” this was what Burns (1978) presented as transforming (or transformational) leadership. While Burns (1978) did not solve the dilemma of one generally accepted definition of leadership, he did open the door to a new way of thinking about leadership

which has led to an increase in the study of what some collectively refer to as positive forms of leadership: transformational, servant, authentic and spiritual.

The need to look at different forms of leadership has continued to be emphasized as we have entered the twenty-first century and the age of the so-called “knowledge worker.” There continues to be an emphasis on studying the actions of a leader without a clear definition of what a leader or leadership is (Heifetz, 1994). While the general literature may not have yet arrived at one definition of leadership, there is agreement among many that the old forms of command and control need to be replaced by newer approaches that emphasize other skills such as emotional intelligence, adaptive work and relationships with followers (Goleman, 1995; Heifetz, 1994; Kort, 2008; Rost, 1991). Although there is no one generally accepted definition of leadership, there typically is agreement that a leader is an individual in some type of influential relationship; this relationship may not require the “leader” to be in a position of formal authority, but he/she does have influence on others. The question (mentioned previously) then that arises after defining leadership is: How are leaders developed? Where do they come from?

#### *How Leaders Develop*

Throughout the history of leadership studies there have been many different theories as to where leaders come from and how they develop. Aristotle believed that leaders were born, to a certain degree, but then their latent talents had to be developed and drawn out in order for them to serve at their appointed times (Wren, 1995). Thomas Carlyle articulated the prevalent theory of leadership of his day when he presented what has come to be called the “Great Man Theory” (Wren, 1995) meaning that true leaders

are born and come forth to lead those who were not born with such greatness. Yet then from these viewpoints the pendulum has swung to the opposite belief that there really is no such thing as leadership and, therefore, there really is no such thing as a leader.

While leadership development has been the focus of a great deal of speculation and research from a training standpoint (Conger, 1992; Day, 2001; Fulmer, 1997), very little research has been conducted on the significance that life events play in leadership development. Avolio in his 1994 article entitled “The Natural” attempted to explore the impact of past experiences on leadership development particularly on the development of leaders who were viewed as “transformational.” Avolio (1994) utilized a quantitative approach to demonstrate a correlation between past life experiences and transformational leadership development. Unfortunately, Avolio’s (1994) research does not provide a comprehensive picture of leadership development because respondents were limited to forced choices in regard to life experiences (i.e. experiences in high school, educational background of parents, extra-curricular activities, etc.) (Avolio, 1994). Others in the leadership literature have attempted to explore the development of leaders through analysis of moral stages (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987) or through specific leadership development programs (Conger, 1992), yet none have really explored the role that significant life events may have played in the development of effective leaders.

#### *Purpose Statement*

A great deal of research has been conducted in the field of leadership training and development. Many scholars have spent vast amounts of time seeking to answer the question: How do leaders develop or Where do they come from? While some work has been done regarding the exploration of life events or experiences upon the development

and growth of leaders, up to this point the research has focused upon a pre-determined set of experiences, specific types of leaders, entire life-spans of leaders and also upon more dramatic experiences within the lives of leaders. These studies have moved the field forward and provided insight into the development of leaders, but there is more that can be done.

The purpose of this study was to discover the role that significant life events played in the development of effective leaders. The use of the term “significant” in describing life events could sound somewhat limiting; however the intent of this study was for participants to define for themselves what a “significant” life event entails. Utilizing a semi-structured interview process, leaders perceived as being effective (according to the definitions provided later) were interviewed to explore the meaning they made out of certain life experiences. Through analysis of this information the author attempted to discover common emerging themes which impacted their development.

### *Research Questions*

The central question asked was: How do leaders describe the impact of significant life experiences upon their development? From this central question, other questions arose:

- 1) How do these leaders define themselves and their leadership?
- 2) How do these individuals describe their own leadership growth or development?
- 3) Are there one or two events in leaders’ lives that happen to help shape them into the person they are?

- 4) Was there a certain “preparedness” in the leader’s life that enabled him/her to learn more from these particular events than others?
- 5) How do these individuals describe their decisions (was it a calling, etc) to move into leadership positions?
- 6) Are there common themes impacting leadership development that emerge from various individuals experiences?
- 7) Are there common experiences that contribute to the development of certain effective leadership traits or behaviors?
- 8) Could some or all of these significant life experiences be replicated in training situations to enhance development of desired leadership traits or behaviors?

#### *Limitations and Delimitations*

A limitation of this study was the broad applicability or generalization of the findings. Given that this study explored the significant life experiences of a selected group of leaders, challenges exist in applying these findings to all leaders who may have different life experiences. While specific life experiences may vary among individual leaders, the broad lessons or categories of development may be applied on a larger scale.

A delimitation of this study was the group of leaders selected for interviewing. These leaders were identified by peers and/or followers as being effective and scored in the “effective range” on the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) assessment. Leaders not perceived as effective and/or who would not score as strong on the MLQ assessment may have different life experiences or may interpret their experiences in different ways. While this posed a challenge to this study, the researcher thinks that this delimitation could provide rich ground for future research.

### *Definitions of Terms*

The definition of *leadership* used for this study was: An "influence relationship among leaders and followers" in which both "raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" while realizing group goals and demonstrating full respect for individual freedom (Burns, 1978; Rost, 1991). This definition is strongly based upon the work of James McGregor Burns (1978) and Joseph Rost (1991). As stated earlier, Burns (1978) was one of the first scholars to question the paradigm of leadership that dominated the early to mid-twentieth century in Western culture. Burns (1978) believed that most leadership was of the transactional variety, whereas a transforming leader would seek to work with his/her followers so that both were elevated to higher levels. In his comprehensive review of the available leadership literature, Rost (1991) noted that in spite of the nearly 15 years that had passed since Burns (1978) published his seminal work, the "industrial paradigm" still prevailed. Rost (1991) too emphasized the need for leaders and followers to interact and to push one another to higher levels of morality.

In order to provide clarity for the remainder of this discussion, two other terms, *training* and *development* need to be defined. For the purposes of this discussion, *training* was defined as the more traditional approach to instruction and learning, involving the transfer of knowledge or skills from a perceived expert to students. The contexts for training can be varied: traditional classroom, self-study, literature and more recently, on-line courses. Again, the key component or distinction of training is the transfer of knowledge from one source to another (Baird, Holland & Deacon, 1999; Day, 2001; Fulmer, 1997).



If training is the transfer or “download” of information, knowledge, etc, *development* is the process of acquiring meaning and, therefore, knowledge, skills, etc from experiences or situations. Development is defined by Kegan (1982) as the “active process of increasingly organizing the relationship of self to the environment. The relationship gets better organized by increasing differentiations of the self from the environment and thus by increasing integrations of the environment” (p. 113). An oversimplification of the difference between *training* and *development* would then be that *training* tends to be a more passive experience for the learner whereas *development* tends to be a more active experience.

### *Significance*

There is currently a clarion call, within the United States at least, for a new generation of leaders to emerge who can help us rise from many of our current struggles. In recent history (perhaps even not so recent, harkening to the 1960’s and 1970’s) we have been beleaguered by a host of “leaders” who have been at the worst, criminals, and at the best, ineffective. It seems ironic that while Burns originally proposed his idea of transformational leadership in 1978 and Greenleaf (1970) popularized the idea of servant leadership in the same decade, those who would set themselves up as leaders continue to operate under command and control paradigms or seem to have the opinion that in a position of power they may do anything they please. To this researcher the current leadership situation begs the question: Where are the transformational, servant, authentic or spiritual leaders that so many have been writing about for many years?

Much writing has been done on these topics and research has been conducted to help identify the major characteristics of these leaders as well as how they may be trained

or developed. It was into this milieu (or perhaps one should say *melee*) that this study entered in anticipation of furthering the knowledge of leadership development and, in particular, the development of effective leaders. While, as stated above, a great body of research exists pertaining to the many forms or styles of leadership that exist or are supposed to exist, there appears to be little on the role of significant life experiences upon leadership development. Much work has been done to study the characteristics of effective leaders, but as Avolio and Luthans (2006) observed too often this results in prescriptive forms of leadership training that promote the idea that if one pays a handsome fee, attends a two-day workshop at a posh resort and leaves with a five or ten step process to leadership effectiveness, one can then change the world.

This researcher does believe that leadership can be taught or trained, but also believes that the development of truly effective leadership behaviors cannot be confined to a classroom, book or neatly defined process. More recent work and exploration into the realm of personal and leadership development would seem to support this idea (Goleman, 1995; Quinn, 2000; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). While some have explored the idea of shaping events or life experiences and their roles in leadership development (Thomas, 2008), often the focus is primarily on major or tragic life experiences. While these events can definitely play a role in an individual's development, this researcher believes that often the seemingly minor incidents or experiences in one's life also shape them.

The experiences we have in life can provide a rich and fertile soil for our personal growth and development. It is often through these experiences that we learn humility, reliance upon others, confidence, our place in the "grand scheme of things" and how we

need to serve others. Many would agree that these (as well as many others) are the attributes that help make a positive and effective leader, regardless of the label you wish to place upon them. This study helps to identify certain experiences in life that can be utilized to develop or enhance the characteristics mentioned above. While each individual experience cannot be replicated, and some you would not wish to replicate as they may be too painful, by gathering this information we hope to better direct and guide the development of future leaders. There may very well be certain experiences that could and should be duplicated; it could be that a service project in a poverty stricken neighborhood or ministry trip to a developing nation can serve to catapult a future leader towards a greater understanding of self and desire to serve others. As one looks through the annals of history, generally the great reformers did not gain their passion and zeal from formal training but rather through their lived experiences and it stands to reason that our future leaders or reformers can be similarly developed.

While not all may agree that we are in a “leadership crisis,” there is strong agreement for the need to develop future leaders. As the Baby Boomer generation (a significant portion of the nation’s working and leadership force) ages and seeks retirement, new leaders must emerge. What kind of leaders will they be and where will they lead us? It is hoped that by identifying influential life experiences and the lessons learned from them, future effective leaders may be helped in their development so that they are ready to take their place in whatever capacity that may be.

## Chapter II

### Review of Literature

#### *Introduction*

While there is no one generally accepted definition of leadership, there typically is agreement that a leader is an individual in some type of influential relationship; this relationship may not require the “leader” to be in a position of formal authority, but they do have influence on others. The question (mentioned previously) then that arises after defining leadership is: How are leaders developed? Where do they come from? This question has also been an ongoing topic of debate, discussion and theorizing since ancient times.

Many of the older views of leadership were based on what Thomas Carlyle called the “Great Man” theory (Wren, 1995). This theory stated that individuals (generally assumed to be men) were born to be leaders and would just arise and assume their positions of greatness in times of need. In adhering to this philosophy, one could argue that there was no need to study the development or training of leaders as these great men would simply come to save us when we needed them. However, even within the natural born leader camp, some argued that these leadership talents or abilities with which an individual was born needed to be developed through some sort of process. This view would be similar to the treatment of individuals born with the potential to develop into successful musicians, artists or athletes; while these abilities are inherent, they must be developed through some sort of process for full utilization by the possessor (Conger, 1992).

Beginning in the mid part of the twentieth century an increased awareness of the importance of leadership and consequent interest in the training or development of leaders arose. Unfortunately, at this time the term *leader* was very loosely applied to anyone who was in a position of formal authority and who managed others, resulting in a preoccupation with training tangible skills (Conger, 1992). As the century progressed, new models and theories of leadership were developed and a distinction began to be drawn between *management* and *leadership*. Managers were increasingly viewed as anyone who supervised people or resources and often were more associated with bureaucracy and attempts to maintain control through status quo while leaders were becoming viewed more as the influential and inspirational figures within organizations and society in general (Fulmer, 1997). As this distinction began to be made between *management* and *leadership*, a distinction began to be made between training and development programs (for definitions of these two terms please see Chapter I).

### *Early Days of Training*

As stated earlier, much of the training that took place related to leadership in the mid to later part of the twentieth century operated from the paradigm of viewing leadership as a set of transferable skills or behaviors. This paradigm placed training programs and workshops into a university-type environment in which experts and scholars in the field were utilized to convey to eager learners the skills and knowledge they needed to become highly effective managers or leaders. In his review of leadership development and training, Fulmer (1997) presented the following table (Table 1) as an overview of where the field has been, where it was at the time and where he saw it headed.

Table 1

*The Evolving Paradigm of Leadership Development*

	<b>Past</b>	<b>Transition</b>	<b>Future</b>
<b>Participants</b>	Listener	Student	Learner
<b>Program Design</b>	Event	Curriculum	Ongoing Process
<b>Purpose</b>	Knowledge	Wisdom	Action
<b>Period</b>	Past	Present	Future
<b>Players</b>	Specialists	Generalists	Partners
<b>Presentations</b>	Style	Content	Process/Outcome
<b>Place</b>	University Campus	Corporate Facility	Anywhere

Adapted From “The evolving paradigm of leadership development,” by R.M. Fulmer, 1997, *Organizational Dynamics*, Spring, p. 60.

For the purposes of this discussion, particular attention should be paid to the participants, program design and the purpose as illustrated in the above table. According to Fulmer (1997), participants were traditionally viewed as listeners; this again emphasizes the passivity of such training. The listener was expected to sit quietly and absorb the knowledge being delivered to him/her by a perceived expert. When designing this overview in the late 1990’s, Fulmer (1997) saw the role of the participant changing to that of a student in which he/she is more actively involved in the overall process, yet the structure and content are still dictated by the instructor. According to Fulmer’s (1997) view, the process should continue to evolve until the participant is what he termed a “learner.” In this role, participants are actively engaged in the learning process by asking questions, participating in exercises and by active application to their current roles or

situations. Through this process, participants have the freedom to take away from such courses or activities as much as they currently need or desire to know (Fulmer, 1997).

Program design for management or leadership training programs has also changed over time and according to Fulmer (1997) should continue to develop into an on-going process. Traditionally, the training would occur in isolated “events.” It should not be misunderstood that an event indicates a one-day course, but can be applied to obtaining an advanced degree or another education program. The main idea of the event view is that participants need only attend this session or program once, receive the knowledge and they are then set for life (so to speak) and only need to go apply what they have “learned.” Realizing that “one and done” does not fit the needs of most learners, Fulmer (1997) saw that most providers of training had shifted to a curriculum-based approach. Through this approach, managers or leaders continually learn but only at certain times, such as during key career transitions. While individuals may be more receptive to new ideas or development during these key transitions (Charan, Drotter & Noel, 2001), this view emphasizes the event-based concept--the events may be on-going, but there is not necessarily a mind-set of continuous learning. Again Fulmer (1997) saw the need for training and development to change to a process of on-going learning, which may involve some type of learning event, but there would be a strong emphasis upon learning and application outside of the traditional classroom.

Fulmer (1997) also emphasized a need for the purpose of training programs to change. The traditional approach had been one of transferring knowledge to participants, often without an emphasis on the practical application of such knowledge. This philosophy shifted to one of wisdom, or of helping managers and leaders with the

application of a wide body of skills, knowledge, etc. to a variety of situations and problems. Fulmer (1997) saw the need for the continual change to an emphasis on action in training programs. By converting knowledge and wisdom to action, leaders and managers would be better able to deal with a wide variety of situations and would be better equipped to continue to learn and adapt (Fulmer, 1997).

While the twentieth century, particularly the latter half, saw a strong emphasis on studying leadership development and seeking to produce effective leadership in a variety of institutions and organizations, the majority of the emphasis was upon training. Many tried to emphasize a new way of training and development of leaders, but very often this was simply newer technology applied to the same type of training that had been occurring for quite some time (Dixon, 1993). One of the main concerns with this type of training was the lack of practical application for the learners in the moment and even the transfer of knowledge and application outside of the classroom. While participants were receiving a great deal of information, they were not experiencing real-world applications for use in their current or even future roles.

Another concern which remains today with more traditional approaches to training is the rapidity of change in the modern environment. While some would promote that they provide “just in time” training, the reality is that often this training occurs after the skills are needed most. By the time a need is identified and training is developed and delivered, an entirely new set of problems or challenges has arisen and, therefore, a new training product is needed. The traditional approach to training simply cannot keep pace with the rate of change in the modern setting (Baird, et al, 1999).



All of this is not to say that there have not been efforts to produce different forms of leadership training and development. The 1970's witnessed the beginning of a variety of outdoor and other more experience-based learning programs for leaders. These programs continued to grow in popularity throughout the 1980's as they provided a seemingly refreshing alternative to the traditional classroom approach to leadership training (Conger, 1992). These programs provided a greater emphasis upon experiential learning as they forced participants to climb trees, swing from ropes and a variety of other activities all designed to emphasize a key learning for effective leadership. While moving the leadership development field forward in regard to moving outside of the traditional classroom and incorporating more experiences into the learning, they continued to emphasize the learning of a particular set of skills or knowledge-base for success. In addition to an emphasis on one particular set of skills or behaviors, these programs also continued to take leaders away from their places of work or service and, therefore, seemingly isolated the desired concepts from the "real world" (Dixon, 1993).

### *Increase of Development*

As the twentieth century continued, some in the leadership field began to see the need for a new model or approach to leadership. Burns (1978) was one of the earliest to see that the more managerial-focused models, theories and grids of the 1960's and 1970's did not meet the need for truly effective leaders within all walks of society. In his seminal work, *Leadership*, Burns (1978) proposed the idea that there were really two forms of leadership: transactional and transforming (or transformational). Burns' (1978) work then encouraged others to begin to think of leadership as different from management, with leadership being much more focused on relationships with followers

and particularly on influencing others to achieve common goals. Avolio and Bass (1991) built upon the work of Burns (1978) by proposing that transactional and transformational leadership really represented ends of a spectrum of leadership and that a leader could in actuality move from one end to the other, indicating a more developmental approach to leadership.

During this same period, Robert K. Greenleaf (1970) was writing about Servant Leadership. While a seemingly new theory to the study of leadership in the twentieth century, in reality the concepts of servant leadership have been around since Biblical times. For the purposes of this study a thorough analysis of servant leadership and transformational leadership will not be developed, but instead attention will be given to the impact the articulation and popularization of these forms of leadership have had upon the field of leadership training and development.

One way in which the transformational and servant leadership theories differed from those of the earlier part of the twentieth century was the lack of prescriptive form present in both. Whereas earlier forms of leadership (ex: situational or contingency) had provided behaviors or steps to follow in certain situations, the two newer forms of leadership were focused more on the relationship between leaders and followers as well as the internal aspects of a leader. These “positive” forms of leadership certainly could be imitated and certain behaviors could be identified that could be taught in a training situation, but in order to be truly effective with either of these leadership forms it is much more likely that a leader must be genuine. The internal focus or nature of transformational and servant leadership presented a challenge to the traditional way of

training as neither was conducive to being broken down into smaller steps for instruction, a necessary component for training (Conger, 1992).

During this same time period, Robert Kegan (1982) introduced his theory of moral development occurring in stages. While not only impacting the world of developmental psychology, Kegan's (1982) idea also impacted the world of leadership training and development, mainly by introducing his idea of *development*: a gradual yet active process that involved the individual essentially becoming more aware of how he/she reacted to, were affected by and in turn affected his/her environment. With the more positive forms of leadership involving more of an internal process in addition to Kegan (1982) presenting development as an individual process, it appeared that a shift away from the more traditional forms of leadership training was happening. While there was an increasing focus on the development of leaders, more questions were opened as to how exactly leaders could and should be developed and was it different for different individuals and forms of leadership?

#### *A Focus on Development*

To this point a review of the history of leadership research and in particular the training of leadership in the mid to later part of the twentieth century has been given. With the presentation of the transformational leadership theory it seemed that the study of leadership expanded to include development as well as the more traditional training approaches. The researcher believes that this was due to the more internal nature of transformational leadership, rather than the more prescriptive behavior of situational and contingency (as well as other) approaches to leadership. Attention will now be given to

where the field of leadership research is presently, with particular attention being given to what work has been done in regard to development.

The continuing problem that plagues leadership researchers is that none are exactly sure how effective leadership is produced or developed. Where do leaders come from and how can we help to produce more effective leaders in the future? Some would argue that until we settle the problem of defining *leader* and *leadership* once and for all, there really is no use in trying to train or develop leaders, because we do not know what we are training or developing (Barker, 1997). While agreeing to a certain extent with this sentiment, this researcher does believe that we can train and develop leaders with some success given that we have arrived at a somewhat agreed upon definition of *leadership*.

While a review of the leadership literature from the past twenty to thirty years can be somewhat disheartening, one can find encouragement in that it seems a greater distinction has been drawn between *management* and *leadership*. Many university programs as well as corporate training programs offer courses or workshops designated as applying to either *management* or *leadership*; rarely does one see the two terms mixed as they once were. In general *leadership* is defined as being some type of influence relationship between a perceived leader and followers in which this relationship is not necessarily based on any position of formal authority on the part of the leader (Maxwell, 1993; Rost, 1991; Burns, 1978). While this very general definition may not satisfy everyone, it does provide a fairly solid foundation for the study of leadership development and training.

*Continued Training Programs or Researching Leadership Behaviors*

In spite of the impression given in the previous pages, it should be noted that this researcher does not condemn a training approach or more traditional training approaches to the development of leaders or leadership. The concern comes into play when there is sole reliance or emphasis upon a lecture or download of information from perceived experts approach (Dixon, 1993; Fulmer, 1997). Due to the nature of leadership, often all one has to study are the behaviors of leaders and, therefore, a great deal of the training and development in the leadership field is based upon studying these behaviors and presenting them in a learnable format (Heifetz, 1994). The problem with the more traditional form of training leadership was that it was either completely overlooked or at least greatly downplayed the relational aspect of the leader-follower interaction, outside of leadership being something done to followers by a leader. Another significant concern with a strictly *training* approach to developing leadership is the idea of a single training event supplying the needed information or skills and the individual now being fully equipped to lead in the most effective manner (Fulmer, 1997).

More recent trends in learning and development, particularly applied to organizations, have begun to move away from the traditional training approach and are tending to embrace what will be called in this study as a *developmental* approach. Kegan (1982) provided a strong definition of development which was quoted earlier; essentially development refers to an ongoing process in which the person is actively engaged in learning, understanding and seeing how they fit into their environment and make meaning of it all. Much has been made of the concept that as we have entered the twenty-first century, and entered the age of the “knowledge worker.” Along with an

emphasis upon recruiting and retaining these individuals who worked more with their minds than their bodies, there also was an emphasis upon organizations themselves becoming “learning organizations” (Senge, 1990).

Learning organization connects to the shift toward a developmental approach to the growth of leaders as it emphasizes the need for continual learning and especially emphasizes the role of the individual learner in creating meaning, or making sense out of what is being seen and experienced (Senge, 1990). This philosophy has become increasingly popular in the field of leadership growth and development over the past several years as there has been an increasing emphasis upon leaders acquiring information or knowledge through a variety of means and then, analyzing how that information agrees with their current reality and various experiences (Fulmer, 1997; Dixon, 1993). Through this process it is believed that individual leaders will be more adaptive for future challenges as they will become what some have termed “life-long learners” (Senge, 1990).

Somewhat related to both the concept of the ongoing learning process (Senge, 1990), the idea of developmental stages (Kegan, 1982) and the relational aspects of leadership is the concept of Emotional Intelligence popularized by Daniel Goleman (1995). Emotional Intelligence basically is the ability of an individual to recognize and manage his/her emotions while also recognizing and responding appropriately to the emotions of others; Goleman’s (1995) argument is that emotional intelligence can be more powerful and important than normal intelligence. Since its introduction in the 1990’s, the concept of emotional intelligence has grown in popularity, particularly in the field of leadership development and research.

Traditional training approaches to leadership growth seemed to overlook the emotional aspect of the leader-follower relationship as these training programs tended to focus on a prescribed set of behaviors that the leader simply had to implement and they would find success. With the shift in thinking regarding leadership being more about a relationship between the leader and followers, greater attention began to be paid to the emotional side of leading; an aspect that had been largely ignored prior to this time. According to emotional intelligence it is important for a leader (or anyone for that matter) to have a strong grasp of the different aspects of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social management (Goleman, 1995). The concepts of emotional intelligence also contributed to the shift in leadership growth away from traditional training and more to the development concept. While one can learn the terminology of emotional intelligence, in order to be truly adept and have this form of intelligence, certain changes or development must occur internally. High emotional intelligence is not simply due to learning how to implement certain practices, but rather it is largely based on internal changes to which the concept of development is most appropriate.

### *Experiences*

As has been stated already, development is much more focused on the internalizing, by the learner, of pieces of information and then determining how this new information makes sense and how the learner interacts with this and his/her environment in a new way. If traditional training approaches are not the best method for developing individuals, an alternative form of learning is needed; this is where the focus has shifted to learning from experiences. The field of training as a whole has witnessed a greater

emphasis upon experiential learning over the last several years as organizations have demanded more application from the training programs (Day, 2001; Fulmer, 1997).

In the management and leadership skills fields, a strong emphasis has been placed upon learning from work experiences, with a particular emphasis upon using these experiences as preparation for advancement to higher levels of management or leadership (Charan, Drotter & Noel, 2001). The advantages of placing leaders into developmental experiences are many. These opportunities allow skills and abilities (that may have been learned in a traditional classroom setting) to be tested and allows the leaders to practice these skills and to strengthen them, often in situations that have less pressure or stakes than other situations. Another strong advantage to development through work experiences is the savings in time and money for the participant as well as the organization. These experiences are conducted through normal work assignments and participants are already on the payroll. One of the key components to successful learning from these work experiences is the act of reflection or reflective practice by the participants (Senge, 1990). Through the activity of reflection, participants are able to construct meaning out of experiences and better determine how to incorporate this meaning into their lives and world, which is related to the concept of development (Senge, 1990; Kegan, 1982).

In his book *Deep Change* (1996), organizational change and positive organizational scholarship expert Robert E. Quinn explored the importance of personal change in leading organizational change. Parallels could be drawn between what Quinn discussed regarding personal change and the concept of development, especially in regard to development. In fact, part of Quinn's theory is within the concept of a



transformational cycle and he discusses the need for organizational leaders to develop the “soft skills” in order to truly lead their organizations through change. Quinn relates the story of one organization with which he worked that was implementing a new quality assurance program. Individual plants implemented the program and there were varying successes. When a particular plant achieved the maximum quality level, there was a celebration of sorts and the managers of those plants were asked to discuss what they did to successfully bring about the change. Quinn relates how he attended one of these sessions and the manager began by discussing the strategies and tactics used to implement the program. As he finished there was time for questions and another plant manager asked how another plant might achieve similar results. The successful plant manager began to speak of developing “soft skills” such as organizational learning and being willing to experiment. The other plant managers began to press him for specifics as these answers were not satisfying to them. Quinn relates how this successful manager later expressed how so many managers want a checklist and specific details on how to be effective, but this is next to impossible (Quinn, 1996). This researcher would argue that this mentality is similar to many approaches to leadership development and is a carry-over from the industrial paradigm (Rost, 1991). Most organizations are primarily focused on getting results and getting them as quickly as possible. The concept of *development* could potentially consume a significant portion of time, whereas *training* seems to be much more efficient.

The importance of learning from personal experiences and specifically through reflection on certain experiences has become a part of some executive leadership education programs. One of the best known instructors in the field of leadership

education is Ronald Heifetz of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Heifetz has developed an international reputation as a leadership instructor and consultant. A particular method that he developed and uses extensively in his courses is the “Case-in-point” methodology in which students in the classroom bring their experiences to class and in essence become their own case studies (Parks, 2005). Through this approach, as well as through sharing and reflecting upon some of their most significant leadership successes and failures, these leaders who are seeking further development are able to extract meaning from their experiences and utilize this learning for future use (Parks, 2005).

The concept of reflection on experiences and constructing meaningful learning from these experiences has opened the door for analysis of the impact of certain life experiences to the development of leaders; here a “life experience” is an experience that is not strictly work related. Some research has been conducted into the role of life experiences upon leadership development. In particular, Bruce Avolio (1994) conducted a study focusing on the development of transformational leaders. In this study, Avolio (1994) utilized quantitative method to determine if there was a correlation between transformational leader behaviors and certain experiences. The study took a sample of leaders who scored as transformational leaders on the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire assessment and then administered a Life-Events assessment asking the leaders as well as their followers to assess what impact they felt the events had upon their leadership development. The events used in the assessment were pre-determined and included such items as parental support, extra-curricular activities and early job experiences. While Avolio (1994) did not find overwhelmingly strong correlations

between the life experiences and the development of transformational leadership skills, he did open a door for further research. By asking about the impact of life events or experiences upon leadership development, Avolio (1994) provided thoughtful background for new avenues to study the antecedents and development of leadership.

### *Life Events or Experiences*

The study of life events or experiences as they impact leadership development is a rather recent trend in the leadership research field. In reviewing the available literature on the study of life events it would seem that this approach is very much in alignment with the concept of development from Kegan (1982). Rather than viewing leadership as something that can be taught in one or even a few individual sittings, the life span approach views various events and experiences throughout an individual's life as having significance and importance to their development. This view also demonstrates the concept of leadership on a spectrum as a leader is continuously learning and growing as they continue to have experiences that are shaping them.

One approach to studying leadership development from this perspective is to examine the actual life stories that leaders tell about themselves. Shamir, Dayan-Horesh and Adler (2005) conducted a qualitative study in which they explored the life-stories that leaders tell; the purpose of their study was to extrapolate common themes in the leaders' stories that may provide further insight into leadership development. The study involved identifying high-potential leadership candidates from similar technological firms who were attending a leadership workshop. In addition to interviewing these leaders, the researchers also analyzed the autobiographies of several famous leaders from the twentieth century. While the main focus of the researchers was on the actual life

stories that the leaders developed and told, one of the main themes that emerged from the stories (both written and verbal) was that of experiences being developmental (Shamir, et al, 2005). This finding would support that certain life experiences are important in the development of leaders and their leadership capacities.

Shamir, et al (2005) makes a case that a leader's own story and even how he/she tells it has a strong impact upon how influential they are with their followers. The suggestion is made by these researchers that several arguments create the basis for why leaders' life-stories are so important in the leadership process. The first argument is that the followers' perceptions and beliefs about the leader mediate the leader's influence and these perceptions and beliefs are often based on information from the leader's story. A second argument is that a leader's story often precedes his/her formally assuming their position and often followers' initial expectations are based upon the stories they hear. Once the leader arrives, it becomes easier for him/her to live up to those expectations in a form of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Leaders also are seen as the managers of meaning and one powerful way a leader can shape meaning is to utilize the power of stories, often their own. These stories can provide avenues for communicating a vision or an inspiring message that will in turn influence followers to strive harder or align more with the stated vision, etc. of the leader. The final argument put forth by the researchers for the importance of leaders' life-stories is that often these stories help shape the self-perception of the leaders. By relating stories in which the leader demonstrated leadership traits or abilities, the leader not only influences followers to view them as a leader but in turn promotes their own self-confidence in their leadership ability.

A qualitative approach using interviews and analysis of writings was employed to collect the data used in the Shamir, et al (2005) study. Through the data collection process, the authors were able to identify four themes that arose out of the stories pertaining to leadership development. The first major theme was that leadership was a natural development for the leaders involved in the study. In essence there was nothing that they did or that happened to them, but their movement into leadership was a natural growth process. The second theme stands in some contrast to the first as some leaders saw their leadership arising from struggle or coping with difficulties. A third theme aligns with the second in that many leaders viewed their development as learning from experience and stressed this as important to leadership growth. The final theme that was found primarily in political leaders was viewing their leadership development as finding and pursuing a cause. The conclusion drawn is that stories can be a powerful method for leaders to influence followers.

Of note is that much of the study of antecedents and in particular the formative power of life events is focused on those forms of leadership that are viewed as more “positive,” such as transformational, authentic, servant, etc. Luthans and Avolio (2003) proposed a developmental model for authentic leadership in which experiences or events in life play an important role. Often life events can be viewed as inherently tragic or negative, but positive events can be formative as well (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Authentic leadership development is based upon positive self-development of which self-awareness is a component. Self-awareness is a significant component of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and is affected by past life experiences and certain trigger events or challenges (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). When an individual has the capacity or

is taught to reflect on past experiences this can help develop “positive psychological capacities” within that individual which will then be utilized in the response to certain trigger events. This then will shape how the individual develops helping to lead to more authentic leadership (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). The following page provides an illustration of the proposed model of Authentic Leadership Development (Figure 1).

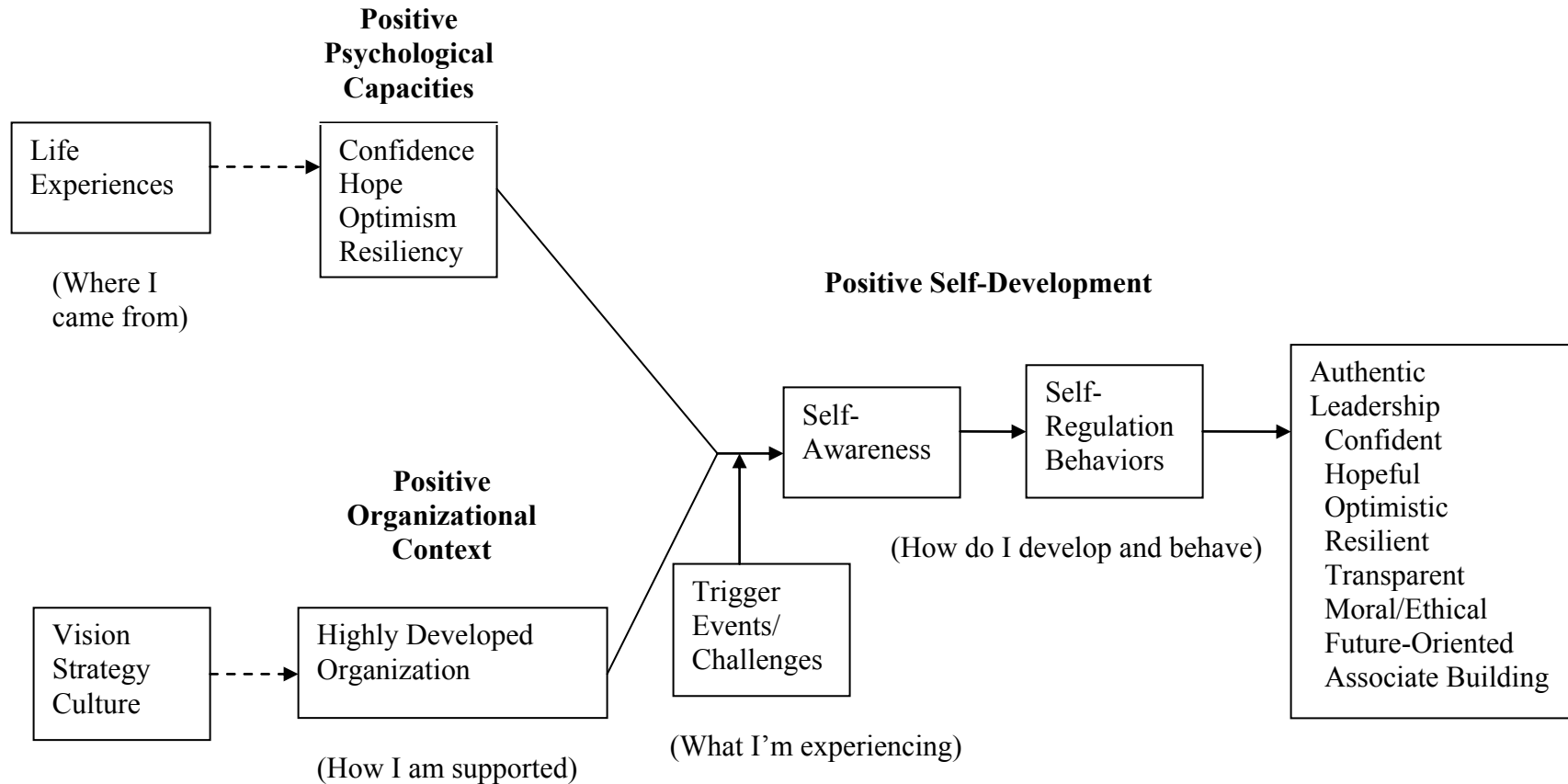


Figure 1  
**Authentic Leadership Development Model**  
 (Luthans & Avolio, 2003)

Some research into the impact of life experiences has focused primarily on what might be termed as major events in an individual's life, or as some have termed them "crucibles" (Bennis & Thomas, 2002). The crucible idea says that many leaders are shaped by major events that occur in their lives including loss of loved ones, fighting in war, losing jobs or other apparently traumatic events which help leaders look deeper into themselves and discover vital leadership abilities or capacities (Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Thomas, 2008).

#### *A New Study*

While research has been conducted in the area of life events and experiences and the impact that these can have on leadership development, there are some areas that have not been fully researched and provide an opportunity for further study and understanding. While Avolio (1994) broke ground in the area of leadership development impacted by life experiences, his study was somewhat limited. The purpose of his study was to explore the correlation between certain life experiences and identified transformational leadership behaviors. Avolio (1994) selected the life experiences he was going to analyze. While this is a legitimate approach to a quantitative study, it limited the choices of the leaders in regard to which experiences they could identify as having impacted their development. The other major limitation to the study was in the more narrow focus on identified "transformational" leaders and especially upon specific transformational behaviors. Ultimately the study found some correlation between certain experiences and certain transformational leaders but it did not provide a great deal of insight into the general impact of life events or experiences upon leadership development (Avolio, 1994).



The concept of crucible experiences as first explored by Bennis and Thomas (2002) and then further developed by Thomas (2008) has contributed to the study of leadership development. As stated earlier their study identified crucible experiences as being those experiences that generally consisted of high stakes and often were tragic experiences. While furthering the idea of life experiences impacting leadership development, these two studies also have some limitations. In the original study the idea of life events or crucible experiences was not to be part of the research. Rather, Bennis and Thomas (2002) meant for their study to be one of comparing leaders from two seemingly very different generations and determine how the two are alike and dissimilar. Through the course of the study, they realized that many leaders from both generations were telling stories of magnitude that had an impact on their leadership development; thus the idea of crucible experiences was born. This limitation in the first study led into another limitation in the second book, which was focused solely on these crucible experiences. Thomas (2008) set out to discover the impact of these experiences upon leadership development and consequential behavior. As with Avolio's (1994) study, this limits the field of discussion as the leaders interviewed seemed more inclined to talk about experiences that they perceived as having an impact directly upon their *leadership* development. While this was the focus of the study, it may not tell the complete story regarding development as the participants most likely automatically limited themselves in the experiences they would select as having impacts.

Another significant limitation of these studies was in the lack of a definition of leadership. The vast majority of leaders selected for both studies were individuals

who were successful from a business perspective and, thus, were included in the study. Because a person has been successful in building a business or in climbing a corporate ladder, does not necessarily equate with that individual being an effective leader. Beyond the more narrow focus of business success, many of the younger individuals were in fact selected for their entrepreneurial spirit and their successes in this area. While they may have demonstrated leadership, many would argue that entrepreneurs are not necessarily the best leaders as they are generally focused on the task at hand and often struggle with leading people. In light of these limitations it would seem that there is room for more research to be conducted with defined leaders and how they perceive they have been impacted by their own significant life events.

### *Conclusion*

While some research has been conducted on life experiences and their consequent impact upon development, specifically leadership development, there is still a great area of opportunity for research in this field. Past research has shown that life experiences can impact the growth and development of a leader, but little work has been done to explore the specific meaning that leaders make for themselves out of their own experiences.

A more active research agenda needs to be implemented to explore life experiences. While some may argue that it is obvious that the experiences we have in our lives shape and develop us, there is very little in the scholarly literature reporting on how this is accomplished. Such a study could explore this area to better determine the impact of significant life experiences upon leadership development.

## Chapter III

### Methodology

This chapter describes the methods that were used in this study to explore the impact that significant life experiences have upon the development of effective leaders. The primary method of research for this study was qualitative in nature since the purpose of the study was to explore the meaning that individual leaders placed upon their personally-selected life experiences rather than attempting to provide predetermined options from which the participants could choose.

#### *Qualitative Approach*

According to Hatch (2002) there are several commonly accepted characteristics of qualitative research that should be considered when one is considering this approach for a study. The following discussion briefly outlines those characteristics and how this researcher feels the study was best suited for a qualitative approach.

1. Natural settings: “Understanding how individuals make sense of their everyday lives is the stuff of this type of inquiry” (Hatch, pg. 7, 2002). As has been stated thus far, the purpose of this study was to explore how the selected leaders made sense of their experiences by understanding the context of the experiences themselves.
2. Participant perspectives: It was key to this study to understand the perspectives of the leaders as they related their life experiences and what impact they saw these events having on their leadership development.

3. Researcher as Data Gathering Instrument: As life experiences are best related in story format, it best served this study for the researcher to utilize personal interviews with participants as the primary method of data collection.
4. Wholeness and Complexity: The stories that leaders told about their formative life experiences cannot be broken down into easily manipulated variables, but rather must be understood as whole events that carry complex meanings for each individual.
5. Emergent design: As this study began a theory was not presented for proving or disproving, however, in the process of data collection a theory did emerge. This is consistent with the qualitative approach and specifically the grounded theory method.
6. Inductive Data Analysis: The exploration of leaders' life experiences moved from the specifics of each individual's stories to generalizations that can be applied to the broader area of leadership development.
7. Reflexivity: This is the process of the researcher placing him or herself within the context of the study.

Consistent with the concept of emergent design (Hatch, 2002) in qualitative study, this researcher realized early in the data gathering process that a theory seemed to be emerging from the data set. As stated above, a particular theory of leadership was not attached to this study, nor was an effort being made to discover the antecedents of a particular leadership theory or school of thought. The central question of the study was: How do leaders describe the impact of life experiences

upon their development? As interviews began and the data began to be analyzed, it seemed that a theory of how effective leaders learn from significant life experiences was emerging and that this was becoming the central phenomenon with which individuals interact, take actions or engage in a process (Creswell, 1998).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) define grounded theory as: “theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process” (pg. 12). The theoretical framework of how effective leaders learn from significant life experiences developed within this study matches this definition. The situation studied within this project was the significant life experiences of effective leaders with the process being leadership and the phenomenon being how these leaders learned from their respective significant experiences.

#### *Approval*

Approval from the graduate committee took place in February of 2009. Formal application to the Institutional Review Board at the University of Nebraska occurred in March, 2009 and approval was granted on May 14, 2009. A copy of the official notice of IRB approval is located in Appendix A. Selection of participants began in May, of 2009.

#### *Role of the Researcher*

Many researchers using the grounded theory methodology have the hope that their study has relevance for both academic and nonacademic audiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This researcher identifies with this statement as he not only has studied leadership as part of his education but is also employed as a leadership

development advisor for a major national corporation and, therefore, feels an obligation to both the academic community and to his fellow practitioners.

Strauss and Corbin (pg. 7; 1998) further identify the following six characteristics of a grounded theorist:

1. The ability to step back and critically analyze situations
2. The ability to recognize the tendency toward bias
3. The ability to think abstractly
4. The ability to be flexible and open to helpful criticism
5. Sensitivity to the words and actions of respondents
6. A sense of absorption and devotion to the work process

A hallmark of grounded theorists is their lack of fear in drawing upon their own past experiences within the analysis of the data set as they realize that their own experiences provide a valuable foundation for making comparisons and discoveries within the collected data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Further these researchers relish the interplay that exists between themselves and the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

A combined background of education and work in leadership development led the researcher to this particular study. Having spent four years as a classroom teacher at the secondary educational level, this researcher has been interested for quite some time in learning theory and in how experiential learning ties to formal education. Additionally, working with identified high-potential leaders in a corporate environment has led to the advising and coaching of these individuals through various experiences and assignments in developing them for future leadership positions. This

work has led the researcher to question why some leaders seem to absorb more learning from their respective experiences, and others do not.

Every researcher enters their investigation with certain beliefs, biases and assumptions which is not necessarily a negative condition (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It is important that the researcher be aware of their own biases, beliefs and assumptions, and when these may be intruding upon the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher's own career as an educator and a leadership development advisor/consultant lead to certain beliefs, biases and assumptions. They are identified in the following:

1. While leadership skills, abilities and traits are somewhat innate and natural, leadership can be learned through a variety of means.
2. Experiential learning is the most effective way to learn and the most valuable experiences are those that happen in the course of "normal life."
3. Effective leaders tend to be naturally insightful and reflective, therefore, the leaders interviewed for this study will naturally reflect upon their respective experiences and infer meaning from them.

#### *Population and Sample*

The names of potential participants for this study were solicited through a request to the researcher's committee members and others who work with leaders on a regular basis. These individuals were asked to supply the names of individuals whom they felt meet the definition of leadership developed for the purposes of this research (see Chapter I for the working definition used in this research). This solicitation resulted in a total population size of 28 individuals.

Purposeful sampling was used to select a sample size of 15 individuals for participation in the study. Criterion sampling (as described by Hatch, 2002) was used to identify individuals meeting the following criteria:

1. At the time of the study, the individual was currently or was recently in a formal leadership position. While this researcher does not necessarily associate leadership with a formal position, it is believed that this lends further credibility to the participants' status as leaders.
2. The individual met the definition of leadership established for this study. Efforts were made to verify that at least one other individual felt that the suggested participants met the definition of effective leadership, thereby supplying a certain level of triangulation and validation for the proposed participants.
3. The individual was perceived as being effective in his/her leadership role.

While not one of the formal criteria, efforts were made to obtain the names of individuals from a variety of leadership positions and types of organizations: profit, nonprofit, educational, governmental and religious. This effort was made to potentially broaden the applicability of the research findings. Also, the researcher took measures to secure a diverse (gender, race, etc.) sample and was successful in achieving this goal.

Once the names of potential participants were secured, the primary researcher began the process of contacting these leaders, following IRB protocol, to determine interest in participation in the study. An initial contact letter (Appendix B) was sent to the leaders introducing the study, the method of data collection (interviews) and



included an invitation to participate. Also included in this initial mailing was a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix C). If interested in participating, leaders were asked to contact the primary researcher via telephone, email or by signing the informed consent form and returning via postal service (note: for those who did not return the informed consent form at this time, signed copies were obtained at the time of the interview). As stated earlier, a sample size of 15 was used for this study; the remaining 13 members of the original population were not used in the study for one or more of the following reasons: they were contacted and either declined participation or did not respond; the researcher was unable to verify with more than one individual that the leader met the definition established for the study; the leader was aligned with an organization type from which several individuals were already participating, which could have potentially biased the results towards leadership in a particular type of organization.

Once leaders had agreed to participate in the study they and selected raters were also asked to complete the Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) to determine their rating as a transformational leader. While this study is not seeking specifically to draw connections to or conclusions regarding the impact of life experiences upon transformational leadership, the MLQ was selected as a research-tested and proven method of determining leadership effectiveness. The MLQ has been found to be a valid instrument in measuring the 9 factors of Full-Range Leadership (Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003) and also has been found through multiple studies to be a predictor of leadership effectiveness and work group performance (Howell & Avolio, 1993; Lowe, Kroeck & Sivasubramaniam, 1996;

Rowold & Heinitz, 2007). Each of the participants scored as either “effective” (score of 2) or “very effective” (score of 3) within the organizational effectiveness category on the MLQ further validating their effectiveness (see table of participants, pg. #44 for individual scores; a table illustrating each participant’s complete scores is located in Appendix D). Criterion sampling also was combined with the extreme case sampling approach in which participants are selected as they represent “extreme” examples of the population being studied (Hatch, 2002). The definition of leadership used in this study assumes that an effective leader is one who is doing more than fulfilling an authoritative position but is also seeking to influence others in a moralistic fashion and those meeting this criterion could be considered “extreme” examples of leadership. Table 2 (following page) provides a description of the research participants using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Every effort was taken to protect the participants in this study; identities of all participants have been kept anonymous and pseudonyms have been used for each participant as well as for any individuals mentioned by name in the interviews. There was no possibility of physical, emotional, psychological or financial harm to any of the participants, nor to the raters selected for completion of the MLQ.

Table 2

*Research Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gend</b>	<b>Appx Age</b>	<b>Loc</b>	<b>Type of Organization</b>	<b>Position within Organization</b>	<b>Appx Yrs of Exp</b>	<b>MLQ Score -org effectiveness</b>
Mary	F	60	NE	Educational—K-12	Administration--Retired	30	3.56
Chris	F	55	MN	Educational—Post-Secondary; Student Services	Administration	30	3.94
Robert	M	60	NE	Religious	Pastoral Staff	40	3.38
Jeff	M	40	NE	Corporate—Customer Service	First Line Management	10	3.55
Rachel	F	65	NE	Government	Elected Office—Retired	25	3.88
Jim	M	55	IA	Corporate—Customer Service	Middle Management	25	3.06
David	M	60	NE	Non-profit Public Service	Upper Management	30	3.60
Pam	F	50	NE	Religious	Pastoral Staff	15	3.50
Terry	M	55	IA	Corporate—Sales	Middle Management	20	2.63
Pete	M	45	NE	Corporate—Health Services	Middle Management	20	2.63
Lynne	F	45	NE	Corporate—Sales/Customer Service	Upper Management	20	3.69
Pat	M	50	NE	Corporate—Sales	Middle Management	15	3.60
Karen	F	60	NE	Educational—Post-Secondary	Administration	30	3.63
Scott	M	45	PA	Corporate—Consulting	Entrepreneur/Independent	20	3.35
Milt	M	65	NE	Government	Elected Office	30	3.00

### *Data Collection*

By interviewing leaders who function in a wide variety of locations and organizations, there is a greater likelihood of the collected data providing triangulation and, thereby, increasing the accuracy and credibility of the developed theory (Creswell, 1998). Efforts were made to conduct the interviews either in the participant's place of employment/leadership or in a location selected by the participant as the most comfortable and conducive to conversation. Seven of the interviews were conducted at the participants' work sites, five interviews were conducted over the telephone and three were conducted at local coffee shops. Interviews were up to one hour and twenty minutes in length, with most averaging approximately 45 minutes in length, and followed a written interview protocol (Appendix E) with appropriate follow-up questions asked as they arose in the course of the conversations. Interviews were recorded using a standard digital audio recorder with the permission of the participant and then transcribed personally by the primary researcher.

Data analysis within the qualitative process is both simultaneous and interactive (Creswell, 2009). This means that analysis is occurring simultaneously with further data collection and the analysis should inform the on-going collection. This concept was evidenced within this study through the evolution of the focus of the study and the interview questions. Initially the primary focus of the study was to explore whether or not there was a singular formative event in the lives of perceived effective leaders. As initial interviews were conducted and the data analyzed, it became clear that while there may not have been a singular formative event in the

development of these leaders, these leaders definitely demonstrated the ability to learn and grow from their various life experiences. This idea led to the recognition of an emerging theory of how effective leaders learn from significant life experiences which also led to revisions in the interview protocol. Both the original and revised protocols are located in Appendix D.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis within the grounded theory tradition involves a multi-step process consisting of open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

#### *Open Coding*

This researcher utilized two methods for open coding. The initial phase of open coding involved a careful reading of the texts to become familiar with the overarching message as well as to develop the general categories of information (Creswell, 1998). The researcher transcribed each of the interviews himself, allowing for a deeper understanding and connection to the data. It is believed that this step helped during the initial phase of coding as the researcher not only read the words of the participants but could more easily hear their voices once again relating their personal stories. *In vivo* coding was used during the initial open coding to preserve the words of the participants and gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the categories that seemed to be emerging. This act of “constant comparison” allowed the researcher to better gain saturation within the categories and to be sure that no new information provided further insight into the categories (Creswell, 1998).

Following the initial phase of open coding, the computer software program MaxQDA 2007 was utilized for further analysis. This phase allowed for the general categorization of the multiple *in vivo* codes that had been identified through the initial phase of open coding. It should be noted that the researcher felt it very important to conduct the initial reading and coding of the transcripts personally without the aid of the computer program as Creswell (1998) has observed, “Computer programs may take the place of a careful analysis of the material. As such, they should not be a substitute for a close reading of the material to obtain a sense of the whole; they should be an *adjunctive* [italics in original] procedure in the analysis process” (pg. 156). Seeking to use MaxQDA as an “adjunctive procedure,” broader categories were recognized through this phase of the analysis and various *in vivo* codes and quotes from the participants were aligned under these categories. A table illustrating the broad categories initially found in the data is presented in Chapter 4, followed by a listing of sub-codes and ideas that were initially identified from the interviews.

### *Axial Coding*

Within the grounded theory tradition of qualitative research, the next step in the analysis process is axial coding, which is the process of reassembling data that have been fractured during open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding is the process by which a central phenomenon of the study is identified by the researcher and then the interrelationships of the categories to this phenomenon are explored (Creswell, 1998). The central phenomenon of a study can be viewed in a simplified way as the answer to the question of: what is going on here? (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this particular study, the main phenomenon seemed to be the

learning of the effective leaders from significant life experiences. While the original intent of this study was to determine if there were one or two significant “events” in the lives of effective leaders that impacted their development, what became clear from the data was that there were not. Rather, the data seemed to be indicating that the real question centered on how do these leaders absorb or make meaning from their significant experiences. Thus, the central phenomenon that emerged following the open coding process seemed to be how effective leaders learn from significant life experiences.

Axial coding also involves identifying the “causal conditions that influence the central phenomenon, the strategies for addressing the phenomenon, the context and intervening conditions that shape the strategies, and the consequences of undertaking the strategies” (Creswell, 1998; pg. 151). As stated above, axial coding is the process of reconstructing the data and determining how the various categories relate to the central phenomenon. Figure 2 illustrates the initial groupings, thoughts and questions the author had during the early stages of axial coding.

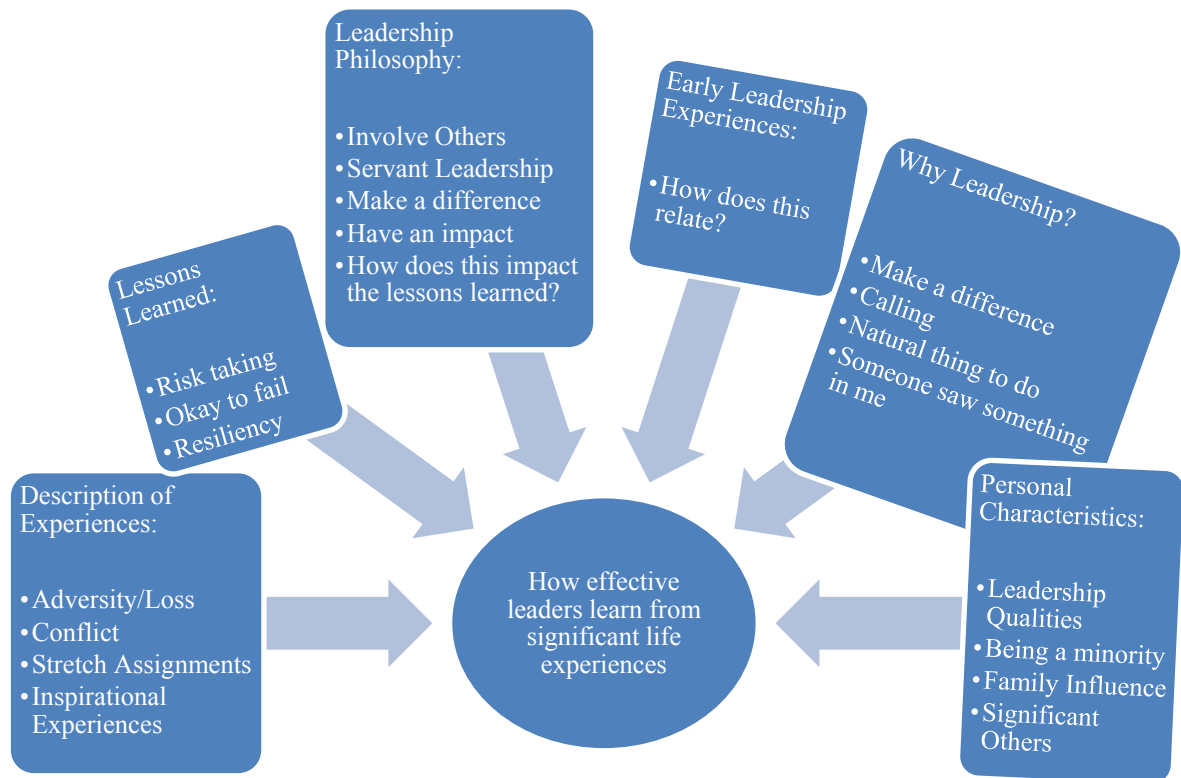


Figure 2



Diagram of initial groupings, thoughts and questions generated from Axial Coding

### *Selective Coding*

Selective coding is the final phase in data analysis within the grounded theory tradition. This is the step which witnesses the systematic relation of the other categories to the central phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). The interrelationships between these categories and the central phenomenon are examined in order to validate the relationships and to further refine and develop the categories and the emerging theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998) provide three important points regarding selective coding:

1. Concepts that reach the status of category are abstractions, they should be relevant and be applicable to all cases, generally speaking;
2. Findings should be presented as interrelated concepts, not just a listing of themes, in order to communicate the emerging theory; and
3. There is more than one way of expressing relational statements.

One of the methods of expressing relational statements is to develop a story which narrates the categories and shows the interrelationships (Creswell, 1998). The main story line that emerged from this study was how effective leaders learn from their significant life experiences. While this study did not discover one or two significant events in the lives or development of the participants, it did discover that these effective leaders have successfully embraced significant experiences throughout their lives and have absorbed great learning from them. Some of these experiences were

long-term, others could be described as singular events. However, the central phenomenon is how they learned from these experiences and the theory presented in Chapter 4 explores the relationships of the other identified categories to this central theme.

### *Verification of Data*

Creswell (1998) recommends that qualitative researchers engage in at least two of eight recommended procedures to verify their studies. For this study the following procedures were completed: triangulation, peer review, clarifying researcher bias, member checks and rich, thick descriptions.

#### *Triangulation*

As stated earlier in this chapter, several methods of triangulation were utilized to further validate the findings. Participants were solicited who met the criteria (stated earlier in this chapter) and who also scored as effective on the Multi-Factor Leadership Questionnaire (see Table 2 this chapter for scores). This step provided verification that these leaders truly are effective in their roles. Further, leaders were sought from a variety of geographic locations and also from a variety of organizations. This further helps to involve “corroborating evidence from different sources” (Creswell, 1998; pg. 202). A diverse sample also was sought and obtained.

#### *Peer Review*

A peer was solicited to review approximately 20% of the written transcripts. Agreement on the coding was gained at 82% further verifying the findings of this study.

### *Clarifying Researcher Bias*

This step is important so that both the researcher and readers understand the researcher's position and how individual biases and assumptions may impact the inquiry (Creswell, 1998). Due to the researcher's role as a leadership development advisor and educator, definite biases existed as to how leaders learn and absorb meaning from experiences. These biases were listed earlier in this chapter.

### *Member Checks*

Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider member checking as "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). This process involves taking the data, findings and interpretations to participants in the study in order to solicit their views on the credibility of the same. All participants were provided with copies of the written transcripts of their interviews for review of accuracy. Additionally all participants were provided a copy of the findings of the study for their review; approximately 25% of the participants were solicited for specific feedback regarding the findings, with no issues or disagreements noted.

### *Rich, Thick Descriptions*

This is the process of writing the analysis in such a way to include detailed descriptions of the setting and the participants involved in the study (Creswell, 1998). The rich, thick descriptions provide a means for the reader to better determine transferability of the findings as the narrative then allows the reader to see if the information could be transferred to other settings. Effort has been made to provide a

thorough description of the participants (see Chapter 4) as well as to provide a description of their leadership roles and their experiences.

## Chapter IV

### Results

#### *Description of Participants*

Before presenting the results from this study a brief introduction to each participant is provided below.

*Mary*—Mary was raised on the East Coast, moving to the Midwest as an adult. She moved into leadership roles early in her life, often through the avenue of athletics and other school offices. Her involvement in sports is evident through her emphasis on competitiveness and teamwork. She is an educator who, by her own testimony, was not looking for a leadership role, but those abilities were recognized in her by others. After many years as a classroom educator, she earned her PhD and became an administrator.

*Chris*—Chris had a geographically-diverse childhood. She started her life in the Midwest, and then moved to Mexico and eventually her family settled in the Upper Midwest. Her first leadership position that she recalls was as the organizer of the “Playful Pals” club with her five-year old friends. From that beginning she has continued to move into leadership positions, primarily focusing on education and social justice work. She is currently director of a Women’s Center for a major university. She has an earned PhD in the leadership area.

*Robert*—Robert also was raised on the East Coast, New York City to be exact, and he, too, moved to the Midwest as an adult. Both of his parents died when he was very

young leading to his being raised by his sister and her husband. Sports played a prominent role in his formative years as he played many sports in junior high and high school. He held his earliest leadership roles as a captain of various teams. In college he joined the ROTC and following graduation became an officer in the United States Air Force during which he earned a Master's degree. Following his military service he became a small business owner in California, and during this time he also became a born-again Christian. He then left this business for the sake of his family moving to the Midwest where he eventually became a school administrator and currently serves on the pastoral staff of a local church.

*Jeff*—A life-time resident of the Midwest, Jeff's early life can be characterized as being raised "in an environment of education." Both of his parents were on the faculty of a local college and this desire to learn has been strongly instilled in Jeff as he has pursued many different learning opportunities. He was heavily involved in athletics as well as having his earliest leadership experiences as various elected positions within his fraternity. He quickly worked his way into a management position at the first-line level where he continues to lead associates in a customer service capacity.

*Rachel*—Rachel was raised in a small rural community in the Midwest and lived in that same area for much of her life. She became active in politics and held a variety of leadership positions within her local and state political party. She was eventually elected to a state legislature position where she served for many years, eventually leaving due to term limits. While no longer in politics, she remains highly active in

community leadership roles serving as chairperson and committee member for a variety of organizations.

*Jim*—Jim also is a life-long resident of the Midwest region, having been raised in a small town and now living in a larger Midwestern metropolitan area. He attributes his leadership to having observed his parents in leadership roles within their local community and having a desire to make a difference. He has led in a variety of management positions in different companies, having served the longest in a mid-management position in a customer service capacity.

*David*—David was born and raised in a small town in the Midwest. As a child he endured a parotid gland condition which kept him out of school approximately half of the time. Through this condition he was able to come to better understand the plight of those bed-ridden and suffering from pain. He has pursued life-work in human services, particularly helping the aged and continues to serve as a director in that capacity.

*Pam*—Pam also was raised in a small, farming community in the Midwest and characterized her family as “hard-working, Protestant ethic folk.” On her sixth birthday, Pam went into the hospital with Polio which has greatly affected her life. Her early leadership experiences were involvement in school leadership roles, followed by leadership in advocacy groups for the physically disabled and other social justice causes. She currently serves on the pastoral staff of a local church.

*Pete*—Pete was born and raised on the West Coast. A member of a minority family, he views this aspect as being one of the most formative parts of his life. Pursuing a path of education led Pete to work in the health care industry where he always has

held management-level positions. Pete moved to the Midwest as an adult where he continues to work in a health care organization at a management level.

*Terry*—Terry was raised in the Upper Midwest and comes from a rural background surrounded by a large family. His first leadership positions were in his school years with his first formal leadership position being a member of the local school board to which he was elected at the age of 21. Terry moved several times throughout his career, generally holding a management-level position and pursuing educational opportunities. He currently is in a mid-management position in a sales organization.

*Lynne*—Lynne was raised in a Midwestern town where her father owned and operated the local newspaper. As she stated this was definitely a family affair. Having the privilege of attending a small high school enabled Lynne to participate in a wide variety of activities including sports, fine arts and other extra-curricular activities. After graduating from college, Lynne was employed by a company in the Southwestern United States that specialized in private aircraft. She was then recruited to move to the Midwest to work for another private aircraft company with whom she is now employed in a senior level leadership position. Lynne has an earned PhD in Leadership.

*Pat*—Pat too was raised in the Midwest and described his upbringing as being surrounded by family and being “very safe and loving.” His first formal leadership role was as president of his fraternity. He has worked the majority of his career for the same company but working in a variety of roles primarily in leadership capacities. He continues to operate in a mid-management position within the same company.

*Karen*—Karen came from the South central United States, but has lived in a variety of locations throughout her adult life, most recently in the Midwest. She feels that she was strongly shaped by the era in which she went to college, that being the 1960's and a time of radical change. She is passionate about education and counts her role as a teacher as really her first formal leadership role. If you ask her what she does, she will tell you that she is a “developer of leaders.” She serves as an administrator in a post-secondary education environment, having earned a PhD in education.

*Scott*—Scott was born and raised in the Eastern United States and continues to live there at this time. He counts the coaching he did for athletics (ranging from little league to high school) as his first, true leadership experiences. He has a varied background as a corporate employee and an independent consultant. He currently is experiencing great change as he is once again embarking on a career as an independent consultant in human resource programs.

*Milt*—Milt has probably the most varied background of all of the participants. He was raised in the Midwest, then left for the East Coast to pursue teaching. After a few years he returned to the Midwest to teach, then eventually left the teaching field to pursue a career as a computer programmer. This led him into contact with his local political party and he eventually became an active member leading to his election as a City Councilman and then most recently election as a state legislator. Along the way, he has developed computer software, invented a few products and built his own home. He is still hoping to find out what he will be when he grows up.

### *Progression of Results*

#### *Open Coding*



Table 3 is presented to illustrate the initial broad categories of codes or themes that were identified in the open coding process. Following the table a listing is presented which represents the categories and sub-codes or quotes under each as they were following the initial phase of analysis. While the general category titles are the words of the researcher, the sub-codes listed underneath are the words of the participants, unless otherwise noted.

Table 3

*Initial Broad Categories and Themes*

<b>General Category</b>	<b>Sub-themes or Categories</b>
Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adversity/Loss</li> <li>• Stretch assignments</li> <li>• Inspirational experience</li> <li>• Conflict</li> </ul>
Why Leadership?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not personal choice</li> <li>• Natural occurrence</li> <li>• Calling</li> <li>• Opportunity to impact and make decisions</li> <li>• Others seeing it in you</li> <li>• Ability and willingness</li> </ul>
View of Development	
Significant Others	
Response to Experience/Lessons Learned	
Leadership Qualities	
Leadership Philosophy	
Openness to Learning	
Family Influence	
Early Leadership Experiences	
Being a Minority	

*Initial categories of phenomenon*

## 1. Experience: Adversity/Loss

My six year old brother got killed in a car accident.

We lost a, a child. She was an infant at that time.  
I had contracted polio...and was hospitalized for 13 months.

The family business burned to the ground.

When I was 34 years old, I had a cerebral aneurism and I was not  
expected to live.

Both of my parents died in the same weekend.

I was a medically-handicapped child.

## 2. Experience: Stretch Assignments

A bunch of kids that were planting trees along a creek...to build a  
windbreak...I was just younger than probably what most would be.

Appointed me as the co-vice chair of the Site Selection Committee for the  
1984 National Convention.

Getting involved in the 1970's in disability rights legislation...Being with the  
League of Human Dignity was the genesis of all that.

When I discovered coaching and went through coach training.

I got married when I was pretty young, I was 19...bought my first house  
when I was 19.

## 3. Experience: Inspirational Experience

The other thing that had a huge impact on me...over time was my grandfather.

I read a book: *Cry the Beloved Country*.

The national director...we got to know each other very well, was a  
phenomenal woman leader.

Coming to know Christ when I was 27 years old created a whole new  
paradigm shift for my life.

#### 4. Experience: Conflict

My father's form of "encouragement," if I can use that term, was negativity.

We moved to Arizona...my wife...if we lived there she'd be dead now...and

there's a bunch of stuff that went on around it

Hired to run a woman's week...I was kind of in the perfect storm of being the

scape-goat, was called a racist.

Growing up a minority.

A management retreat...white against minority meeting.

I had a boss who was manipulative I guess would be the right word.

When I took the principal position...you become an object of criticism.

I ran headlong into a very abusive, manipulative supervisor.

#### 5. Why leadership?

*Not personal choice (researcher's words)*

Or that I even wanted to be in leadership.

I think naturally...people tend to follow you a little bit...even though

that wasn't your intent when you start out.

Kind of pushed me towards that early in my career.

I don't know that I would've thought of myself as a leader.

So I certainly took on those (leadership positions) throughout my life,

never really thinking about it.

I kind of just drifted into leadership positions.

I guess I just didn't see it in myself. It just kind of happened.

*Natural occurrence (researcher's words)*

I'm an ENTJ and it just sort of happens that I kind of turn out to  
assume leadership roles.

I just sort of rose to the top.

It felt very much like that was the next step.

It's like, "okay, now you do this."

Well, it was almost natural.

And really for myself, it wasn't a matter of choice...it was just like, I  
compare it to, I never thought about not going to college. That  
was always what I was going to do.

It was just a natural position for me to step into.

Whenever there was opportunities for leadership, it was something that,  
you know, happened.

It was about taking responsibility which is a real natural thing for me  
to do.

I'm an ENTJ and have always very easily accumulated responsibility.

*Calling (researcher's words)*

You know in the church we use the language of "call." I think that I  
was open to guidance from a higher power.

I had a feeling...and I told my husband, "I want this...this is the job I  
want."

*Opportunity to impact and make decisions (researcher's words)*

I liked having a bigger role in decisions that were being made that  
impacted me.

I really did want to be a change agent. And that change comes from  
the top.

It was always wanting to be in a significant role.

Part of it is wanting to make a difference, wanting to have an impact.

I know that a leadership position is much more about making  
an impact and making a difference.

*Others seeing it in you (researcher's words)*

But I also had people that believed that I could do it and that is very  
influential.

Somebody seeing in me...the leadership potential.

Somebody who was in a leadership position for some reason saw  
something in me and pulled me out of the normal pathway.

My boss at the time, made me quote "chief counselor" and then  
eventually gave me the director title.

*Ability and willingness (researcher's words)*

When someone would ask, "Who can do this?" My hand always went  
up first.

I've always been able to get people to come along with me.

I always felt like, you know, I could probably do the job...I was  
willing to be the risk taker...

I think it's where I want to be.

## 6. View of Development

Growth has really been in terms of getting involved.

I watched other people and tried to learn from other people.

Painful! You know it's coming to terms that I wasn't very good at it (leadership).

You learn by going through those really difficult times.

I learned over time.

I learned along the way...I learn a lot from experience.

It just seemed to come in, sometimes in baby steps almost.

Leadership's messy.

A huge portion of it is the doing.

Slow upward trajectory.

You learn from difficult experiences more than anything.

At some minimal level you need to have content knowledge.

Really evolved when I was exposed to coaching.

I spend more time in the formal learning, but more stuff sticks from life experience.

I think I've had a few major "aha" moments.

What the life experience does is the emotional intelligence development.

It's been a progress.

It definitely evolved over time.

Leadership is very dynamic. And you have to be willing to change.

Formal learning kind of just opens up the door for experience.

It's just been a transformation...over a period of time.

It is more about the learning and the mistakes along the way.

Troubled!

It's really been a long process of getting a lot of corners knocked off...great amount of weathering that's done.

#### 7. Significant Others

I can be thankful for, in having him as my first boss and kind of pushing me.

Usually there's been somebody to kind of encourage me to keep, to go forward.

When I was a sophomore we had a new youth pastor at our church.

They mentored me.

The fact that I married the man that I did...he really encouraged me a lot.

I've had some really great mentors and models that I've learned a lot from.

I also had people that thought I could do it.

I have been so fortunate to have had people I could learn from.

For me it's been about having the mentors, the people who were always to support me.

And I think the principal really felt I had some qualities that would be effective in a principalship.

I know my dad was a leader. And so I think Dad and I were pretty close.

And he made being captain a leadership task...So he put upon me a sense of duty.

The thing that really made a lot of difference to me was the mentoring that I got along the way.

So I've always tried to keep a principle of someone I'm learning from and  
then turning around and who am I teaching behind me?

#### 8. Response to Experiences/Lessons Learned

What I learned from that was...I went out and worked hard...I was probably  
most proud that I finished it.

A turning point for me, because I think up to that point...it was kind of you're  
self-centered a little bit.

Probably the biggest value to me long-term was the accountability my dad put  
to that.

I'd come to the realization then how short life is and how precious it is...when  
the clock ticks midnight you can't ever turn back, it's gone.

When I raised my own children I vowed I would never use negative tactics.  
fill them with hope that they would become someone special.

As I'm going through this, what can I pull out, how can I be better for this?

I am a different person and a stronger person for it.

Gave me an acute awareness of justice issues.

Boost in confidence.

I learned that...I could deal with the national press.

I've learned so much from people I've worked with, from failures, from  
mistakes.

Some of it is just self-reflection.

It made me reflect on, was any of it true?

It made me kind of gain strength to keep going.



I really had to dig deep and think and learn and grow from that experience.

I've had to learn to give as well as receive with grace.

I've just internalized so many values about equality and dignity.

Gave me confidence and the experience to kind of know how to go about  
doing those things.

It just gave me a really excellent paradigm to think about how to get the most  
out of people. How to help them grow.

How can this make me a better person?

That has really spurred me on again to be more and to do more.

What are the things you would need to do differently.

I think all of that allowed me to become more authentic, or really step into my  
own authenticity.

What is important to me? And what is my purpose in this world?

You know, I discovered so much about my own essence.

No matter what happens, no matter what the shock is, no matter how difficult  
the situation may be, you move ahead.

First of all telling the truth is not negotiable. And second of all it's not about  
me, it's about the person that I'm interacting with.

Impacted my perspective on life. That the little stuff doesn't matter...I valued  
every interaction with another person differently after that.

Taught me the value of every single moment, every single moment of life.

Wouldn't change it. I'm so glad it happened to me....Yeah, because I think it  
made me different.

I was very open to building relationships...with my colleagues. I mean I needed them. I needed mentors...And I guess with the death of my parents that was a familial type of team that we had. And so, where else could I get that?

Finding out, so what difference does a Christ-centered life make on you?

I'm not afraid to fail.

Part of that was learning how to deal with criticism...there may be 1% of that, that is true and I need to hear it. So I learned a big lesson in humility.

Finding out that you're not always going to get it perfect, but you know you're going to make it through.

It's all okay.

As I've gone forward I've had really strong feelings about the interpersonal environment, the kind of work environment that we've wanted.

I think I understand in a different way because I've been dependent on others, I've been bed-fast.

## 9. Leadership Qualities

I'm very passionate about what I do.

I have this, and always have had, this moral compass.

If a leader doesn't have really high integrity, I don't think they're a very good leader.

What is the right thing for the people I'm working with, the company.

It's about development.

Providing feedback is really important.

I am a learner.

I can spot good ideas. What I'm good at is activating the idea.

I'm not sure you can be a leader if you're not a learner.

I was a worker and a doer.

Had a vision of things, you know of where this group could go.

I think I'm an innovator, and a visionary, I truly see the big picture.

I wasn't afraid of challenges and I wasn't going to be intimidated by what  
other people were thinking about it. Just do the job.

I define myself by elements of character from the Scriptures.

My identity in Christ.

I've always been a learner, I always want to learn.

Active.

Almost everything I do I really throw myself at it.

I think in a lot of organizations if you're willing to work hard, you can be the  
leader if you want.

My approach to leadership is to outwork anybody else.

Pretty early on I was organizing stuff.

I often was saying, "people, let's do this, let's do that" And making it happen.

#### 10. Leadership Philosophy

It really is all about relationships.

You had to have trust and you had to have open communication.

I decided I wanted to save the world.

I like to make a difference and certainly this is a job where you can make a difference.

Leadership really does mean that you are leading other people and you're working with other people.

I do almost nothing on my own and I think that's really important.

I try to do it by teaching people.

Bringing people together.

Be fair, do the right thing.

Education.

Because of some of the experiences they had with racism, I was aware of inequities fairly early on.

For me leadership really is thinking about what difference do we want to make?

Inviting people to the table who may not have otherwise thought about being there.

Someone willing to serve.

I like to see myself as someone who empowers other people to develop into Leaders.

My leadership style is to pursue excellence as opposed to success.

To establish some vision for them, to establish some direction, to give them support.

Leaders are the ones who change things in the world.

I really want to be about the other person, I really want them to emerge.

My leadership style is really sort of a blend of coaching and being a task-master type of coach.

I'd like to think I embody what a servant leader's really all about.

My path has been about trying to identify how to facilitate learning and growth.

I am a developer of leaders.

You take the person you are into everything you do in leadership, you can't separate those two.

I'm a people person. My leadership style is participatory.

I'm a farmer in that I plant a lot of seeds in hopes that people will pick up ideas and move with them.

You want to empower your people to do what they can do.

Character and integrity.

I've found being in that role makes a big difference.

Style of letting, you know making sure they participate and getting buy in.

Understanding there is such value in the mistakes you make along the way.

I really try maintain that very experimental environment.

People are free to follow passions and to take risks and to innovate.

## 11. Openness to Learning

I don't think I was prepared at all, I think that's why it was so very, very painful.

When I was 21 or so, I mean God got a hold of my life and so that's a

huge, huge influence in my life. The biggest influence in my life.

Because by that time I had been state party chair for three years...So yeah, it came at a good time.

I think there was just a total revelation to me, the whole apartheid issue over in Africa.

Well preparedness in that...all of those issues are deeply personal. So everything I did impacted me personally.

Through the process of maturation.

You know it's the whole idea of difference and how do we accept others who have different worldviews from us?

It all came out of the transition that we went through.

And the more I was around them, the more I was noticing some synchronicity that was going on.

I really started noticing...um, sort of signs from the universe.

It was all of those flirts and winks and I kept getting them, I still get them from the universe about this.

I don't think you learn anything until you're ready to learn it.

And so I guess when you know, when she kind of tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Have you ever thought about the principalship?" I thought, "My, what an opportunity."

That was the period of time when I came to know Christ.

So it was a matter of a lot of changes happening...And so, so it was just a time of opportunity.

## 12. Family influence

Grew up in an environment of education.

Very safe, loving kind of environment. I had great parents, siblings, um grandparents.

I had an idyllic childhood.

I had a mother and father who were active in the community.

Told by my parents that I needed to get my college education.

I did have a pretty keen sense of social justice. I think I got it from my family.

I don't know how she (mom) got that message but that's what she passed on to us.

Very hard working, farm families.

Hard working, Protestant work ethic, believing folk.

Continually brought home to us at home from the standpoint that being from the minority population, it was stressed as soon as we started going to school that we needed to not only perform well.

Education is what seems to set people up for success later in life.

My parents...took some lead roles in the community.

My father was undoubtedly where I learned the most about business and running the business and interacting with customers.

Strong family, loving parents, encouraging parents.

My mother and father always said, "you will go to college."

I know my dad was a leader. And so I think, you know, Dad and I were pretty close.

Grew up in a pretty close family.

Personally had a great, loving family. Excellent mother and father was greatly influenced by grandparents and great-grandparents.

### 13. Early Leadership Experiences

First was treasurer and then lastly was president of the fraternity.

And there was this group called “Nuclear Freeze” and I got involved in that and I became chair of that for a couple of years.

I became chair of the county party.

I got elected to an at-large seat on the City Council.

Actually was elected student body president.

Elected to school board in my hometown at the age of 21.

I was the president of my fraternity.

Minor leadership positions in high school.

Elected the freshman class president.

I was class president in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

I was a student senator and we created the new system actually that was student senators in 10<sup>th</sup> grade at my new school.

I’ve almost always been in leadership positions, like elected leadership positions.

In high school I typically held offices in organizations that I belonged to.

I helped organize a group of people with disabilities.



Vice president of the student council.

I always had leadership roles in school.

I was a 24 year old female, actually 25 year old female who had  
really never managed anyone formally in a business setting.

President of the girls' athletic association.

In 9<sup>th</sup> grade I was the captain of the football team, I was the captain of the  
wrestling team, and I was captain of the track team.

Junior year in college I signed up for the ROTC.

I think it first came up in sports programs.

Probably my first experience was in De Molay, a fraternal organization for  
young men in high school. My peers elected me master of the chapter.

#### 14. Being a minority

When I went into the legislature, there weren't very many women, there were  
nine of us altogether at that time. And sometimes I think I was a token  
woman on some of the committees.

Well, in a sense it was more difficult being a woman and so I felt I had to  
work harder and be better prepared for everything.

But I would say it really forced me to be on my toes and take some chances  
perhaps about running for a chairmanship and the running for speaker.

My disability without a doubt. That's um, that affects, has affected and does  
affect really every area of my life.

From the standpoint that being from the minority population...we really needed to outperform what would be accepted as the standard or average.

Growing up a minority...it has really shaped who I am and you know what I want to accomplish from a leadership standpoint.

I had a group of employees who were all male, most of whom were older than I was...and it was very difficult. It was an eye opener to say the least.

I would say the most difficult thing early on was developing kind of a thick skin, if you will. The “guys” who eventually, I don’t know if they got used to me or embraced me, whatever...we’re going to have to deal with her. That was really hard for me.

### *Axial Coding*

Axial coding is the process of reassembling data that have been fractured during open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using the codes identified in the process of open coding, the data was reassembled around the central phenomenon of how effective leaders learn from significant life experiences. The general categories identified were: causal conditions, intervening conditions, contextual considerations, strategies and outcomes.

Causal conditions are defined as those categories of events or happenings that create the situations or cause or influence the occurrence of the central phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Related to the central phenomenon of how effective leaders learn from life experiences, four types of causal conditions were identified. While captured under the broad umbrella of experiences, the four

conditions are: experiences of adversity or loss; experiences of inspiration; experiences of stretch assignments and experiences of conflict.

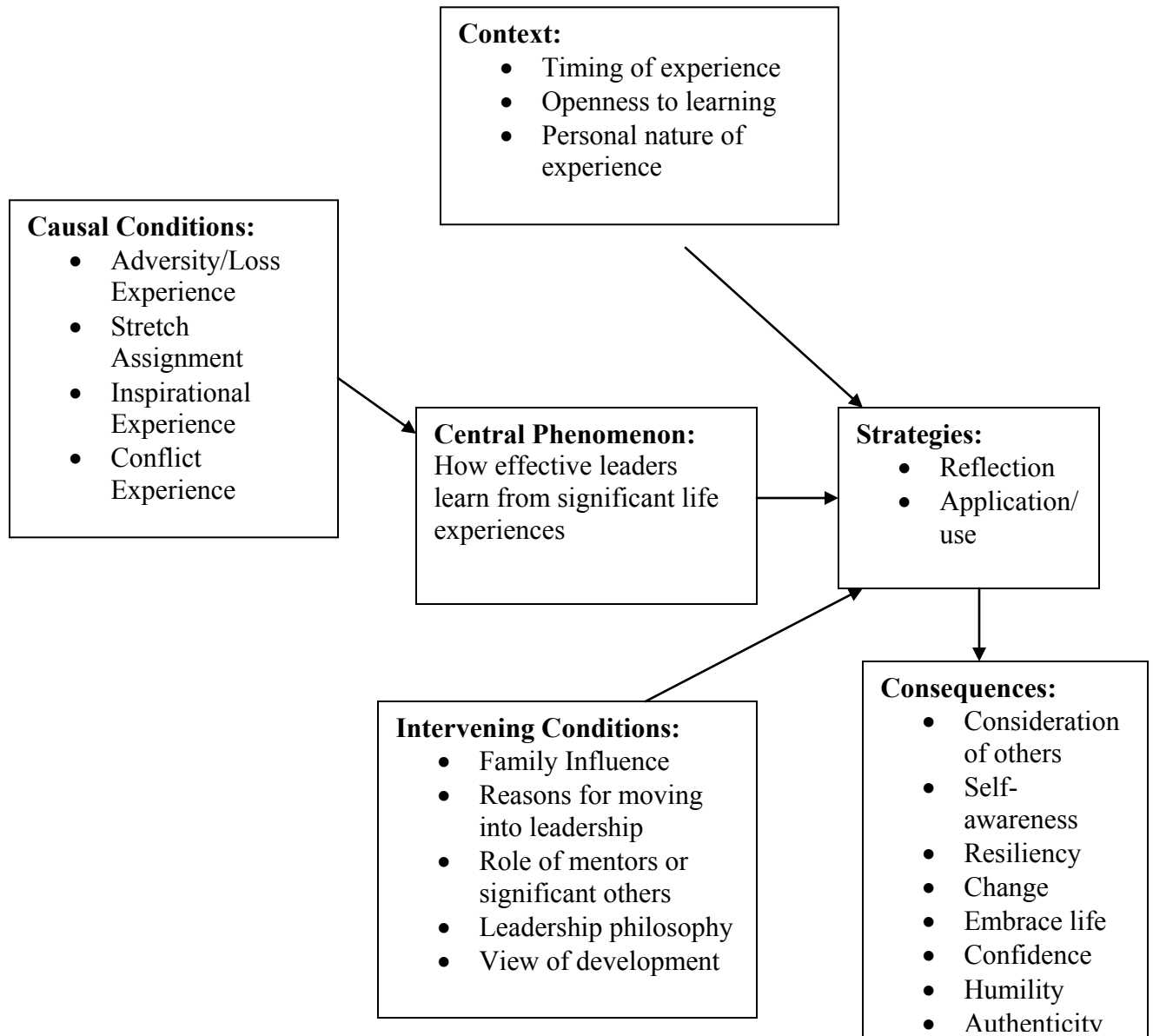
Intervening conditions are broader conditions within which the strategies occur and are mitigating factors in the impact of the causal conditions on the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through the process of axial coding, several intervening conditions were found to be significant or influential. The intervening conditions found in this study were: family influence; reasons for moving into leadership; role of mentors or significant others; leadership philosophy; and view of development. The contextual conditions identified in this study were the timing of the experience, the openness to learning by the leader, and the personal nature of the experience. Contextual conditions are those conditions with which the strategies occur and that help to create the specific conditions or environment to which the participants respond (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Strategies are the “how” in relating to the participants dealing with the central phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These strategies may be unique to the particular situation and, therefore, “strategic” or they may be viewed as a consistent reaction to this sort of problem or challenge and, therefore, seen as “routine” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Both types of actions or interaction are valuable for study as they help provide insight into how the participants react to the unique situation as well as demonstrating how they might react to similar situations in other contexts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Consequences then are the outcomes of the unique strategies employed related to the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).

*Presentation of the Theoretical Model*

The grounded theory model for the description of how effective leaders learn from significant life experiences is presented in Figure 4. This model is based upon Strauss and Corbin's framework (1990) and was developed from this study.

Figure 3



Visual Display of Theoretical Model

*Phenomenon of How Effective Leaders Learn from Significant Life Experiences*

In order to detail the results of this study, the researcher felt it most helpful to begin with the explanation of the central phenomenon and then work outward to explore the interrelationships of the other categories with this central category. As has been stated earlier, the original intent was to explore the significant life experiences that effective leaders had to determine if there were one or two formative events that shaped them into the leaders and people that they are. As may be recalled from Chapter 1, the central question behind this research was: How do leaders describe the impact of life experiences upon their development?

As the interviews were collected and the data analyzed it became clear that these leaders struggled to find or describe one or two events that they felt were the most formative. Early on in the interview process comments were made such as this one by Chris: “Wow! One event that has had a strong impact on making me the person that I am...Hmmm. That’s so hard because it really is not one thing, it really is everything.” In a separate interview Pete seemed to concur: “...it’s not an event, so it’s a process...that has really shaped who I am and you know, what I want to accomplish from a leadership standpoint.”

Other participants were more certain that they could not narrow down their development to one single event. David stated, “I can’t think of a single formative event. I contribute it more to weathering; you know the old rock that kind of got smashed.” Milt agreed with, “...I can’t think of any, any formative experiences...I guess I find something that interests me and I go for it.” So as the early interviews were analyzed and data continued to be collected, it seemed that the pursuit of one or

two formative events would not be fruitful. However, as the conversations continued, it seemed clear that these leaders had absorbed a great deal of learning from their lived experiences. All participants were able to relate certain experiences they had, large and small, that they felt had an impact upon them; the trouble was not in learning from life experiences, but rather trying to narrow it down to determine which one or two may have had the greatest impact.

Consistent with Hatch's (2002) concept of "emergent design" the main theme of how these effective leaders absorbed the learning from their various experiences began to appear. As has been related in Chapter 3 the process of open coding and then axial coding further revealed this concept of effective leaders' learning as the central phenomenon of this study. While much of the data points to this core area of learning, the self-concept of "learner" by the leaders was very evident. Nearly all of these leaders testified to being learners and consistently seeking continual and varied learning opportunities. Four of the participants have earned doctorates and another is in the process, five others have Master's degrees and another has all coursework completed minus the Thesis, the final four participants all have college degrees and talked about many other professional educational courses or certifications that they have pursued. As can be seen, learning is a consistent theme for these leaders and as they discussed their life experiences they naturally gravitated to what they had learned from these times. In viewing the broad concept of this grounded theory study, it became clear that the conditions leading to the leaders' learning were the various experiences themselves.

*Causal Conditions of Phenomena Related to Effective Leaders Learning from Life Experience*

The overarching category or causal condition that related to learning from life experiences for effective leaders is that of the type of leaders' experiences. However, within this large category the data set revealed four types of experiences or causal conditions that will be detailed here: experiences of adversity or loss; experiences of "stretch assignments;" inspirational experiences; and experiences of conflict.

*Experiences of Adversity or Loss*

The broad descriptive term of "adversity or loss" are the words of the researcher used to describe a general category of significant experiences that were related by the participants. These terms were selected because they best described the feelings that were communicated by the leaders as they told their stories. These stories detail experiences in which the leader him/herself either lost a loved one or they experienced some form of personal adversity.

"Well I would say one event that happened was both of my parents died in the same weekend." This statement by Mary began the story of how she lost two of the closest people in her life within a three day time span and also how then a door of opportunity was opened shortly thereafter. Mary's mother had been in a nursing home ever since her parents had moved to the Midwest from the Southeastern portion of the United States. Her father had battled stomach cancer in the previous year and seemed to be doing well. As she stated it had been a tough year and they "got through" Christmas and headed into the longer winter months. Her brother had come from the East Coast for a visit and was hesitant to leave. "He came back from one of



our visits and he said: ‘You know, I don’t know if I should go home...I don’t think mom has a lot of time.’” Mary assured him that all would be fine and that she would call him if anything should come up.

Her brother left on Tuesday and on Friday morning, Mary received the call that her mother had passed away during the evening. Since her mother had not really known anyone in the area, the family decided to have a small private service at Mary’s home. The minister had come down following Sunday morning services to discuss the particulars of the service. In the meantime it had started snowing and so her father requested that they go ahead and hold the service then, “...everybody’s here that’s going to be here.” After the service was over, Mary’s husband encouraged she and her brother to take the pastor down and have a piece of pie and a cup of coffee. Not long after the minister had left, Mary’s husband came down the stairs and “he says, ‘You’re dad’s gone.’ And I just, I couldn’t believe it.”

Other participants also related stories of personal loss. Pat talked about how he and his wife lost a baby. “...the thing that defines me to some point and that is we lost a, a child. She was an infant at the time.” Pat went on to talk about the pain that this experience brought him, yet how he sought to find answers and lessons even in this tragic circumstance. Terry lost a young brother in a car accident and discussed how the suddenness of this event left a deep impression. “When I was 12, my 6 year old brother got killed in a car accident...one minute my brother was alive, the next he was dead and he never came back.” The impact on Terry made him appreciate and embrace life even more and he feels this event still carries a strong influence upon him: “...this was probably the most major event that really drove a stake that I never

could quite get away from.” It is interesting to note that while not all mentioned the loss of a loved one as a significant learning experience, a total of six of the 15 participants related that they lost a close family member, many of them when the participants were young.

Lynne’s story of adversity did not involve the loss of a loved one but rather witnessing the loss of the family business, a local newspaper. “...when I was eight years old, seven years old, somewhere in that vicinity. The family business burned to the ground. I remember my mother and father downstairs in the middle of the night, probably around 2:30.” She went on to talk about her father rushing down to the scene and her mother putting she and her three brothers in the car and driving to the downtown of their small town. “And we actually stood in the post office that was across the street...and literally these flames, it was the middle of winter, the flames were bursting out of the building. The water that the volunteer firemen were pouring on the fire was literally freezing in the streets.” Lynne talked about how she could sense how scared her parents were, yet that was the only time she felt that they were really afraid. Following the fire she watched as her father and mother boldly and bravely rebuilt what they had lost and taught their seven or eight year old daughter a valuable lesson in the process.

Other participants faced adversity in the form of illness and medical challenges. Pam contracted polio at a very young age and relates that “without a doubt” her “disability...has affected and does affect really every area...” of her life. In 1952 on her sixth birthday, Pam was admitted to the hospital with polio and she remained hospitalized for 13 months. She related how this event not only has had a

life-time impact upon her, but how her farming parents learned quickly to deal with circumstances that the other farm families around them were not faced with, yet they were always loving and supporting.

“When I was 34 years old, I had a cerebral aneurism and I was not expected to live.” This was the story of adversity that Karen related in her interview. “I was in intensive care in grave condition for ten days before they did surgery. The aneurism burst again...” While Karen seems to be a very passionate individual, she related this story with remarkable calm and talked about how serious it really was: “they said, ‘Well, she’ll be a vegetable the rest of her life.’” Yet it would seem that Karen’s indomitable spirit allowed her to rise from this experience as she was not only talking coming out of surgery, but also relates how this was one of the best experiences of her life. “Wouldn’t change it. I’m so glad it happened to me...”

David described himself as a “medically-handicapped child.” Suffering from a parotid gland condition he endured extreme pain and facial swelling that kept him out of school for three or four weeks at a time. This led to his being “half home-schooled and half schooled in the public schools.” He was fortunate in that his mother was a teacher and so he did not struggle academically, but did feel that, “I never really had a very good gauge on myself...and so I’ve always been very critical of myself...” While an adverse situation, David also feels that this childhood experience is what led him to be passionate about his current work in human services, specifically for the aged.

*Stretch Assignments*

A second type of causal condition that was seen in the data is “stretch assignments.” These are experiences that seem to have pushed or “stretched” the participant harder or further than they had been before, yet through these experiences they were able to learn valuable insights about themselves and valuable leadership lessons.

Jeff related how when he was a child he had a difficult time in following through on commitments and his father was well aware of this trait. “You know I was a great starter, a great idea kid, but I would get involved in something and then I would not want to continue with it.” He related how in the Spring of the year he was recruited by other area kids to help plant trees along a creek to help build a windbreak. Jeff wanted to help plant the trees and he also wanted to play baseball later in the year. His father used this opportunity to emphasize the importance of following through on commitments and hard work. He made a deal with Jeff that he could only play baseball if he followed through on his commitment to help plant the trees. “...I went out and worked hard. I mean there were long days, we worked and planted all these trees...and of course I was just younger than probably what most would be in that situation.” Jeff still looks back on this “stretch experience” as a very formative time in his young life and he carries the lessons learned to this day.

While Jeff’s assignment stretched him physically, Rachel’s experience stretched her comfort and confidence levels. After serving for three years as her state’s Democratic Party chair, she was asked by the Democratic National Chairman to serve as co-vice chair for the site selection committee for the 1984 National

Convention. Quickly though, Rachel was provided the opportunity to lead the whole project: “And the chair ended up not coming to any meetings but one. And the other co-chair was treasurer of the party and he just wanted me to go ahead and take the leadership...” Rachel found herself dealing with the national press in every city that was visited, yet she realized that she could deal with them to a “satisfactory degree.” She also learned to “...deal with a committee of significant Democrats from all across the United States.”

Pam was also stretched out of her comfort zone as she found herself dealing with disability rights’ issues on both the local and national levels. “...I helped write the architectural barrier law that we have...I helped put into place a program for funding for people who, to help them stay independent in their own homes.” Additionally she helped organize various “White House conferences.” “So I helped organize a White House conference on women and also a White House conference on people with disabilities...” These experiences contributed to an increase in her confidence and opportunities for more service.

Jim and Scott both related stories where they were stretched, although their experiences were of their own design. Jim related how he became interested in the area of life and career coaching. “...I discovered coaching and went through coach training, and really discovered where I come up short and where my beliefs are holding me back.” The process of becoming certified as a coach is not an easy one and Jim discussed how he had to go through months of training, spending a significant amount of his own money, and testing in order to fulfill this dream. Beyond learning to be a coach, Jim was also stretched as he sought to integrate

coaching into his organization. “I submitted a proposal to my boss at the time that I would like to teach my managers and five people from the high-potential, high-performing group...took several months before my manager actually moved that proposal upwards and finally they approved it.” Scott relates how he married his high school sweetheart at the age of 19 and then also bought his first home at the same age. He stated that this was one of the more formative experiences for him, “I would say (being) stuck out in the world at the age of 19 and on my own...and also being responsible for another human being to a certain degree. Taking a risk that way and jumping into it.” While definitely a challenging situation, Scott learned not to fear failure and not fear taking a chance every now and then.

### *Inspirational Experiences*

A third causal condition that emerged was that of inspirational experiences. This was one of the more challenging categories to finalize as there was clearly evidence in the data of something occurring around this idea. As analysis continued it seemed clear that the participants were speaking of significant experiences in which they were inspired, either by events or an individual, and that inspiration led them to be or to do more and, therefore, had lasting impact.

Chris talked about a particular individual, a former leader, who had an impact upon her. She relates an experience when she worked for the student YWCA. “The national director...was commuting from New York to Minnesota, so we got to know each other very well, was a phenomenal woman leader...Anyway, she just was, she was both inspirational to me in terms of her thinking and her actions.” This woman who had been a minister and had been active in social justice both within the United

States as well as in the Central American underground railroad movement encouraged this young and rising leader to do more and be more. “And she was constantly inviting me to grow in very caring ways...it opened up a lot of the world to me.”

Jeff relates that it was his grandfather who inspired him to care more about people and to treat all with respect. “I can’t think of too many men that I’d probably respect more other than him.” Jeff talked about how his grandfather was respectful to anyone and how when he would bring his girlfriend (now his wife) by his house, his grandfather would always stand and show her great respect. “...just to see how he led his life, how he treated his family, how he treated those that he worked with....And I think that was a huge influence for me.” Jeff continues to strive to demonstrate that same respect for those around him.

“I read a book: *Cry the Beloved Country*. That impacted me tremendously.” Rachel, a girl from a small, fairly homogeneous town in the Midwest, related how this book’s message regarding apartheid and racism greatly impacted her. This book as well as current events within the United States brought social justice into her awareness and inspired her to strive to make a difference and to make changes where she could.

Robert related how his personal conversion as a young adult is what inspired him and caused a change in his life. “I would have to say coming to know Christ when I was 27 years old created a whole new paradigm shift for my life.” This experience inspired Robert to re-examine his life and his priorities and eventually led him to sell his lucrative business and move to the Midwest in an effort to provide a more stable environment for his children. “So what it meant for me was a change of a

world-view and a change of some of my motivation for things.” These leaders’ inspirational experiences led to definite changes and valuable lessons in their leadership development.

### *Conflict Experience*

One type of experience that kept emerging in the stories related by the participants was that of learning from conflict with other individuals. Sometimes these individuals were family members, sometimes they were bosses and other times the conflict was with general groups of people. In spite of these difficult and sometimes painful experiences, these leaders were able to draw meaning out of them and move forward in their own development.

Terry’s conflict experience involved a very close family member: “...when I was again, in my teenage years, my father’s form of encouragement, if I can use that term, was negativity. He told me, and my siblings, that we’d never amount to anything, that we were always going to be ditch diggers.” Terry admits that this type of negative reinforcement from his father led him in his early years of management to pursue positions for the sake of recognition, in the hopes of proving his father wrong. “Not that I hated my dad, I just didn’t want to be a nobody, I wanted to be a somebody.” From this experience, Terry has learned important lessons in regard to his own parenting and how he treats others.

Pete talked about the difficulty of growing up as a minority, but also how that has been a part of some of the difficult experiences he has had. He described a management retreat which, “...ended up feeling very much like a white against minority meeting.” This was a shock to Pete and to most of the other participants, as



he had felt that his organization was beyond this point. "...very traumatic for everybody involved. Extremely traumatic actually." Pete was quick to point out that the impact was felt by nearly all of the participants, white and minority, and that it was traumatic for all of them. It also helped him to see "...how much of a chasm there really is still between some minorities and some whites."

Somewhat similar, Chris related an experience in which she was hired to conduct a women's week at a university in the western United States. Unknown to Chris, there was a "...complicated history at this university between their woman's center and their multi-cultural studies." Unfortunately, this placed Chris in "the perfect storm" between the two centers and resulted in her being somewhat of the "scape-goat" for the problems. Through this conflict she was called a racist which "...was really hard because I was someone who was actively anti-racist, and in a public setting was called a racist." Chris ended up resigning as a result as she felt this was the best course of action to bring peace to the situation, however, she was able to learn and grow from this experience.

Robert also learned what it was like to be the target of criticism. He had been in many leadership positions, but he views his time as a principal as his first truly "visible" leadership role to multiple parties. "Suddenly when you're the principal of a school you're very visible to all of the students, you're very visible to all the parents and you become very visible to the community. And then you realize that everything you do falls under scrutiny. And you also realize that every decision you make will be opposed." He went on to talk about how being the object of criticism meant that he had to deal with things he had never dealt with before. Also how frequently he

had someone complaining about a course of action he had taken, "...but it seemed like there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't have at least one person on the phone or in my office." Robert admits that he learned a great deal of humility and how to deal with criticism in a more constructive manner.

Lynne and David shared similar experiences as their conflict centered around poor bosses. Lynne relates, "I think we learn a lot from what we don't want to be." She went on to describe a former boss: "I had a boss who was manipulative I guess would be the right word. Extremely smart, very intelligent and inside that person was probably a really scared little boy." She talked about how this boss could not relate to people and did not trust anyone. As a result, he would only meet with his direct reports individually and then if he were called on something that was said, he would deny it and there was no one to verify the other person's story. David also struggled with a poor boss. He encountered this person when he was fresh out of college and somewhat idealistic. "...I came out very idealistic, really revved up...And we were all committing ourselves to social justice and change and marching out as a generation. And I ran headlong into a very abusive, manipulative supervisor who did a lot to beat my self-confidence flat." He went on to talk about how this person who worked in human services created a highly negative and caustic work environment and ultimately sapped the energy and enthusiasm of the workers. Yet in spite of this, he stated, "I count that now as probably one of the best experiences that I had in preparing for a leadership position." David and the other leaders truly learned from these difficult experiences.

### *Context in Which Learning and Growth Strategies Developed*

While the above experiences were often in and of themselves valuable learning opportunities, these leaders developed strategies (whether conscious or unconscious) by which they more fully absorbed the learning that was available. It is important to observe the contextual markers that influenced these strategies developed and to more closely examine them in relation to overall theory. These contextual considerations are: timing of the learning experience; the leader's openness to learning; and the personal nature of the experience, how it directly or indirectly affected the leader.

As the discussion of these contextual conditions follows it should be remembered that these are the "specific sets of conditions (patterns of conditions) that intersect dimensionally at this time and place..." (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; pg. 132). Each of the leaders may have experienced these contextual conditions in slightly different ways and to varying degrees which means that some experiences reveal stronger ties to the context than do others.

#### *Contextual Condition of the Timing of the Experience*

One of the original questions helping to form this research was an exploration of the surrounding context of significant life experiences. This researcher sought to explore whether or not certain leaders were more open to learning experiences at certain points in their lives than at others. The idea of being open to learning experiences truly can take on different forms and the data seemed to be pointing to two different aspects of this idea. One of those aspects is the more "philosophical" concept of openness, meaning something within the leader is making them more open

at that time. This idea will be explored under the heading of “openness to learning.” The other aspect is that of the actual timing of the experiences for the leaders, meaning what were the surrounding events that contributed to the leaders using the strategies they did or being more open to learn at these particular times. Timing of these experiences seemed to strongly emerge as a contextual condition impacting the strategies employed by the leaders to learn from these experiences.

Jim had pursued the stretch opportunity or experience of gaining his coaching certification and of applying this to the organization for which he worked. One of the initial events that prepared him for this learning experience was the transition that his company was then experiencing. “...It all came out of the transition that we went through...” His company had a very long and reputable tradition in the United States and was known for being a very solid employer who prided itself on never having had lay-offs. In the late 1990’s, this company began to go through restructuring and transition. While still not laying any employees off, many offices were closed or downsized leaving employees with the hard choice of remaining with the company and moving or staying in the area and finding new employment. Jim observed, “...and so as we went through those transitions, we created new structures, new processes, new procedures, and all of that really seemed to work very well, very effectively. But we seemed to be losing our people in the dust behind.” Having a Master’s degree in Educational Counseling, Jim went to his area of psychology to see what other organizations had done in similar circumstances. At the same time his wife, a business correspondent for a local newspaper, attended a fellowship in the East. There she heard a presenter discussing the topic of coaching and that evening

she called Jim and told him, “I think I’ve found what you’re looking for.” Jim then began to pursue coaching more to discover what possibilities were there. Jim credits this time of transition for himself, the company and his employees as being one of the primary causes behind his openness to pursuing coaching which stretched him and has also had a significant impact upon his approach to leadership.

Robert, too, was undergoing a significant time of change in his life when he experienced his “inspirational experience” of spiritual conversion and became a born-again Christian. As he stated his “coming to know Christ” at the age of 27 “created a whole new paradigm shift for my life.” At this time in his life he had just left the military and was beginning to pursue a career as an entrepreneur/small business owner on the West Coast; additionally there were changes within the family. “So it was a matter of a lot of changes happening. Just left the military, kids were just starting to get to be school age at the time. So it was just a lot of transitions that was setting it up at that time.”

Rachel indicated that timing played an important part in both of the experiences she related during her interview. In regard to the stretch assignment of being asked to be co-vice chair for the site selection committee for the 1984 Democratic National Convention, she strongly felt that the timing of that experience was just right. “Oh yeah, I think so. Because by that time I had been state party chair for three years, and, and not only had I learned a lot about organizing and being effective at the state level, but I had also been on the national committee as a result. So I had been able to form relationships with others throughout the United States, other state chairs and other national committee people. So yeah, it came at a good

time.” She went on to state that had this opportunity come three years earlier, not only would she not have been asked to serve, but she would not have been nearly as ready to absorb the learning and use that in the future. Rachel also pointed out the timing of her inspirational experience in reading the book, *Cry the Beloved Country*. While she did not feel that there was really any preparation the timing of the reading was interesting. “I think there was just a total revelation to me, the whole apartheid issue over in Africa. And then that was just about the time I think that things were starting to bubble to the surface in this country regarding the Civil Rights issues, so the time was probably right for learning about some of those race issues.” It would seem that the timing of reading this book helped open Rachel’s eyes to the variety of racial issues and struggles that were facing our own nation.

Pete was able to learn from his conflict experience of the painful management retreat due to the timing of the event; but the timing he spoke of was in relation to the particular time or period in his life rather than a specific moment. “...you know I think had that happened 25 years ago, when I first started, I think that could’ve been a bad situation. You know for any number of different reasons, that could’ve really sent somebody over the deep end.” He recognized that in his younger years he would not have been as willing to forgive the statements of others and that he would not have been as able to embrace the concept of difference in others. “But through the process of maturation, I mean, one of the things that you have to learn is that you need to temper your responses when emotions are very high...You know it’s the whole idea of difference and how do we accept others who have different worldviews from us? And I have been embracing that more and more on my journey.”

The suddenness of their experiences is what seemed to impact the strategies employed by both Karen and Terry in absorbing learning from their adversity and loss. Karen talked about her aneurism, "...it was instant. I'm walking, life is normal and the aneurism burst! It was unexpected, there were no symptoms and you were expected to die." This unexpected event impacted Karen by causing her to more fully appreciate life and every moment. Terry concurs as he too experienced a sudden loss in the death of his brother. "...I never realized that, that my brother, my mom, my dad, anybody, I just thought they'd always be there. Then all of a sudden one day he wasn't." This also reinforced to Terry how precious life is and has taught him to take advantage of every moment.

Mary had lost both parents in the same weekend and for her the timing of that experience is what seemed to open the door for another opportunity. This example provides an interesting dynamic in that she learned from the experience of losing both parents relatively at the same time, but the timing of this experience also opened her mind to other opportunities. Not long after her parents' deaths her principal came to her and asked her about her goals and vision for the future. "It was right after that whole event that (my principal) came to me, tapped me on the shoulder and said: 'What do you want to do when you grow up?'...And so I guess when she kind of tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'Have you ever thought about the principalship?' I thought, 'my, what an opportunity.'" So again, it would appear that the timing of these experiences contributed to the strategies that were employed by the leaders in order to make sense of the experiences and to absorb learning from each unique situation.

### *Contextual Condition of Openness to Learning*

Openness can be defined in a number of different ways and applied to multiple concepts, but the main theme is the idea of no obstructions or free access, one could also say susceptibility. As stated earlier, the section examines the more philosophical approach to openness that seemed to emerge from the participants' stories. Timing of the experiences, noted above, played a role in the strategies employed, but so did the openness or susceptibility to learning. While one could argue that this condition could fall under the category of an intervening condition, this researcher elected to place it as a contextual condition. This decision was made due to the fact that the participants seemed to indicate that this openness on their part occurred at a particular point in time, or at the least after a specific time. More will be said regarding intervening conditions later, but in general intervening conditions are viewed as those that are longer term within the individual. Again, these stories of openness seemed to occur at a specific moment of time, thereby appearing to be more of the contextual nature.

Three of the participants in this study identified themselves as born-again Christians and indicated that this fact had bearing on how they interpreted and absorbed these life experiences. Pat, however, was very explicit in stating that he felt his conversion at the age of 21 allowed him to approach the painful experience of losing an infant daughter from a different perspective. "...when I was 21 or so I mean God got a hold of my life and so that's a huge, huge influence in my life. The biggest influence in my life." This statement was made by Pat in direct answer to the question of why he felt he was able to learn from this particular experience as well as



others. He went on to talk about how his spiritual view point allowed him to perceive these difficult experiences as opportunities to grow. “And so as I read in the Word [the Bible]...that’s just the way it is and you can use that for perseverance and for you know, welcome tribulation. It’s coming and how are you going to use it? You know, are you going to use it for perseverance and learning about yourself and getting better, or not?” So while his conversion has impacted his overall philosophy and perspective on experiences, it would also seem that had these events occurred prior to Pat’s embracing of Christianity they potentially would not have had the same impact upon him.

Lynne’s response to the question regarding openness to learning combined the philosophical concept with that of timing. “...I don’t think you learn anything until you’re ready to learn it. The story, the lesson may be presented to you many times over in life and until you’re really ready to hear it or ready to learn it, you often don’t even pay attention to it.” Her viewpoint seemed to be that the timing of particular lessons is important, however, it seems beyond our reach to know when an individual is ready to learn a particular lesson or from a significant experience. As she stated, “It’s the one, ‘when you’re ready to learn the teacher will appear.’”

As he began to pursue the concept of coaching and trying to discover if this was the answer to helping his employees feel more engaged as they were impacted by the transitions and changes, Jim spoke of “signs from the universe.” “This will sound cryptic, but I really started noticing, um, sort of signs from the universe that really aligned with coaching.” Jim quickly stated that prior to this time he was not one to normally pay attention or notice these signs, but the events that led him to coaching

and surrounding his pursuit of this idea caused him to pay more attention and to be open to the lessons of this experience. First of all he was searching for answers to help employees through the difficulty of transition and change, when his wife attended a conference and heard a speaker who had authored a book on career coaching. Jim began corresponding with this individual who encouraged him to pursue coaching and to try to integrate it into his organization. He joined the local coaching chapter as an observer and met some of the coaches. “And the more I was around them, the more I was noticing some synchronicity that was going on that was really steering me down that path. And I just decided there’s something about this that I need to follow, so I started following it.”

Jim related one specific example where he strongly felt that the universe was pointing him down a certain path. He was becoming more interested in coaching and decided to attend a one day workshop near his home area. As he was driving to the workshop he felt that there were two specific things that he wanted to happen and if they did he felt that this would be a clear sign that he should pursue coaching certification. The main speaker was a psychologist from Chicago who had developed a coach training program and Jim wanted to meet him and he also wanted to network with a particular chapter of the coaching organization.

“And I really wanted to meet this guy from Chicago, and so I got to the auditorium, oh, about 10 minutes before the uh, before his presentation. And sat down in the I think second or third row. Sat there looking over the program and stuff like that. And a guy came in and sat right in front of me, turned around, introduced himself and it was this guy. And I mean if that isn't a very blaring um, signal from the universe, I don't know what is. So I got the opportunity to chat with him for awhile and told him how I wanted to sit through some of his workshops in the afternoon, some of his breakout sessions because I specifically wanted to get what he had to offer in coaching. And so

that afternoon I went to his first breakout and uh, sat down and he was doing this little thing on intuition so we were supposed to turn to the person to our left and do this little experiential intuition thing. I turned to the person to the left and I introduced myself and he introduced himself to me and he was the president of the ICF chapter here (that he had wanted to network with).”

As Jim stated these “flirts and winks” from the universe led him to be open to the possibilities of coaching and led him to pursue that path of a stretch experience that has greatly shaped his overall leadership style and philosophy.

#### *Contextual Condition of the Personal Nature of the Experience*

While every experience that an individual has is personal, the theme that emerged from the data in relation to this was at the level the experience touched the person. Some of the experiences resulted in the loss of a loved one or greatly affected the individual physically. Other experiences touched on the personal nature of the leader as they were in a minority status and impacted how they filtered the experience as well as what strategies they employed to absorb the learning. Other experiences, particularly those in the conflict category, threatened the self-image of the leaders and, therefore, were highly personal in nature. From the stories related and the data analyzed it seemed this idea of the personal nature of the experience was emerging as one of the contextual conditions impacting the central phenomenon.

Pam speaks of how her polio has been the single most impactful event in her life. Beyond the time spent in the hospital as a young girl, she continues to be impacted by the disease. She is in a wheelchair and has obvious physical disabilities. While this has caused Pam to have “...to learn how to get my needs met in a way that doesn’t put people off” she also struggles with the way others view her. As she observed, “Having a visible disability makes me stand out.” She talked about how

even now, as a member of the pastoral staff of a local church, it is interesting and somewhat distressing to see how she is treated differently depending upon the day. On the days when she is not wearing her clerical robes she comments that there is a significant difference in how those who do not know her treat her as compared to when she is on the platform and in her robes. She went on to talk about how the experiences she had in developing legislation and gaining access for disabled individuals in her local areas was driven largely by the fact that these are not “abstractions” for her, but rather very personal.

Similar to Pam, David and Karen were impacted by physical impairments or medical conditions. David spoke of his childhood condition of the parotid gland and Karen spoke of her cerebral aneurism as major learning experiences in their lives and the fact that these were so personal in nature seemed to contribute to the learning from them. Three individuals, Mary, Terry and Pat all spoke of the loss of a loved one who was close to them as being significant experiences for them. Again, a death in the family is very personal and lends itself to a deeper learning experience.

The experiences related by participants that related to the category of conflict experiences also seemed to be much more personal. In these experiences often the person was attacked and their self-image or confidence was affected. Both Chris and Robert related how they came under criticism. Chris, in working on the woman’s week and being placed between two “warring” groups was called a racist. She has dedicated much of her life to social justice issues and as she commented, “...I was someone who was actively anti-racist and in a public setting was called a racist.” This experience was deeply personal to Chris and she admitted, “And I cried a lot

too....And I'm not a big crier either." Robert talked about how, in the principal role, he was under constant scrutiny and criticism. "...it seemed like there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't have at least one person on the phone or in my office." He compared this to a Biblical incident in which King David was fleeing from his son's rebellion and he was being falsely accused by a family member of the former King Saul. "So I learned a big lesson in humility with that." Both Robert and Chris were the objects of criticism, much of it seemingly undeserved and due to the extreme personal nature of these experiences they were able to absorb learning for the good.

A final example of how the personal nature surrounding a life experience impacts how a leader learns from it can be seen in relation to being in a minority status. Rachel commented on learning from being one of the few women in her state's legislature. "But when I went into the legislature, there weren't very many women, there were nine of us altogether at that time. And sometimes I think I was a...token woman on some of the committees." She went on to talk about how this made it more difficult for her, yet caused her to resolve to work even harder: "Well in a sense it was more difficult being a woman and so I felt I had to work harder and be better prepared for everything." Pete also dealt with being a minority in a conflict situation as he related the difficulties faced with the management retreat and the aftermath. This event caused him to realize that there was still much work to do to bring his organization along in regard to diversity and embracing difference. But there was also a personal element as Pete felt that he had been personally let down. "And so...I guess tied in there was the assumption that well because I've been working with these people for so long, the leadership understood me and would take

care of me and my needs. And that became obvious that there was a disconnect there...” Not only was Pete affected by the comments and attitudes, he felt a certain sense of betrayal as he had believed that his peers and leadership above him had accepted him for the leader that he was, rather than seeing him as a “minority.” This researcher believes that these examples demonstrate that the personal nature of the experiences contributed contextually to the strategies employed by the leaders and how they then learned from the experiences.

#### *Intervening Conditions Influencing Learning and Growth Strategies Developed*

Intervening conditions can be viewed as those conditions or characteristics of situations or individuals that are long-term or sustainable over time. As opposed to contextual conditions which are generally unique at a given moment, intervening conditions are those that are broader than the context and more generally applicable (Creswell, 1998). The intervening conditions identified through this study were: family influence; reasons for moving into leadership; role of mentors or significant others; leadership philosophy; and view of development.

#### *Family Influence*

The role of the family in assisting leaders in making meaning and absorbing learning from their various life experiences was one of the earliest themes to emerge from the data. Nearly all of the participants described their backgrounds in positive ways. Some of the many statements are listed here, due to the volume of these statements, effort was not made to identify the individual speakers, rather the point is to drive home the role of the family. “Grew up in an environment of education.” “Very safe, loving kind of environment.” “I had an idyllic childhood.” “Very hard

working, farm families.” “Strong family, loving parents, encouraging parents.”

“Grew up in a pretty close family.”

Beyond these general statements of loving and strong upbringings, several of the leaders specifically mentioned important lessons learned from members of their families. Chris, who is very active in social justice issues, talked about how her parents early on presented a message of equity and appreciating differences to their children. Her father was a corn geneticist aligned with the local university and as such many international students came to work with him. Often these students were invited over for dinner providing an opportunity for Chris and her siblings to come to appreciate other cultures. She specifically mentioned one instance where her father drove home the message of anti-discrimination.

And I do remember one day when I was oh, I was probably about 10. My father came home and all of us were sitting around the dinner table, he was a little late. And he came in and he didn't get angry very often but he was livid that day. And he looked at all of us and said, "Don't you ever judge a person by the color of his skin." And we were like, "okay." Because he was just really, really mad. Well we found out what had happened was he was trying to find an apartment for a graduate student and his wife who were moving from Colombia to (a Midwestern city). And he had been to a couple of apartment buildings and they had said, "we don't rent to, uh, black people." I mean, A) they weren't black and B) he was like, "Why wouldn't you. I mean they're graduate students and it's not like they won't pay..." Anyway, he was really upset and so I just kind of had some awareness of inequities.

Additionally Chris recalls an incident when she and her younger brother experienced the anger of her mother when they demonstrated insensitivity to other races.

I was probably 8, my brother was 5. My parents had some international students over for dinner, they had strong accents and you know we were in (a Midwestern city) where not a lot of people had strong accents. I remember they had left and we were upstairs laughing at their accents, and I also think it was something they had said, it was some perspective that was like, "come on!" You know, that didn't fit with our world view. And my mom, she didn't say it in a mean way, but it was very firm, she was like, "okay, think about it. They're like studying in another language and they've moved far away from home. Many times, sometimes, with their families some times without, they're trying to figure out how to adjust in a different world. Think about how difficult that would be. And, and if you learned another language you would probably have an accent too. But here they are, you know, succeeding." And then she also said, you know about the perspective, she said, "just because people see things or do things differently than we do, does not mean that it's wrong. It's just a different way of doing and being. Sometimes it could be wrong, but there are different ways of doing and seeing things in the world. So don't just assume that because someone thinks something different it's the wrong way." I think maybe it was how they were holding their forks or something, I mean it wasn't anything huge. But, but, really I think back to that time and I'm like, "wow, what a great message to send to kids." And my parents grew up in small towns, like my mom grew up in (a very small town), come on. I don't know how she got that message but that's what she passed on to us.

These lessons from her parents drove home to Chris the importance of equity and have helped her embrace the ideas of social justice that have been a major part of her life and her learning experiences.

In his stretch experience of working hard and planting trees for a windbreak along a river, Jeff specifically mentioned the influence of his dad in helping him learn from this experience. "And that was probably the biggest value to me long-term, was just the accountability that my dad put to that." By making his son stay with the task and even making the opportunity to play baseball contingent upon his fulfilling his obligations, Jeff's dad helped to instill in him a valuable lesson. David's grandparents and even great-grandparents played a significant role in helping him to learn from his life experiences. As a "medically-handicapped child" he spent a



significant time away from other children and instead spent a good deal of time with the older generations of his family. As he developed deep bonds with them and also endured his own adverse situation, his desire to help others and specifically the aged deepened. He reflects now and feels that this is what truly helped lead him to his life's work of working in human services and specifically an agency on aging. He comments: "...finding a passion for aging services because some of the dearest people in my life as a child were in their late sixties and nineties. In fact on my office wall, I've got a picture of myself, probably at age four or five, with my 98 year old grandmother. When people comment on it, I tell them that was me with my first client."

The role of the family in helping leaders absorb learning from life experiences became evident in these and many other comments and stories shared by the participants.

#### *Reasons for Moving into Leadership*

One of the questions asked during the interview was the participant's reason he/she believed he/she moved into a leadership position, this could be generally or specifically related to his/her current position. It was interesting to see how a theme emerged of natural leadership. Even outside of responses to this specific question, many of the leaders talked about how it just seemed natural and that they had always or at least consistently found themselves in leadership roles or positions. As the theory or how leaders learned from significant life experiences began to emerge, it seemed that this view of the reason to move into leadership had a relationship in some way. Through further analysis it seemed that this truly was an intervening condition

that impacted the strategies used to absorb learning from life experiences. It almost seemed as if the leaders felt they must learn something from these experiences because they are leaders and that is just a part of their life.

Karen expressed it this way when she was asked to relate an event pertaining to her life and an event pertaining to her leadership, “There’s not a difference, you can’t separate. You take the person that you are into everything you do in leadership, you can’t separate those two.” Jim seems to agree as he views his leadership as being something inherent. “And really for myself it wasn’t a matter of choice...It was just a natural position for me to step into...I don’t know, you know it’s just part of the genes or something.” Two of the other leaders interviewed, Milt and David, both attributed their movement into leadership, at least partially, to their personality types. Milt stated, “I’m an ENTJ. And it just sort of happens that I kind of turn out to assume leadership roles.” Echoing this idea nearly word for word, David commented, “I’m an ENTJ and have always very easily accumulated responsibility and been excited to take on projects and responsibilities.”

Several of the leaders expressed a desire to have an impact, to make a difference and to be agents of change as the reasons they moved into leadership. This was particularly strong with Pete as his role as a minority and the opportunity to work through leadership to bring change connected well. “...the idea that I really did want to be a change agent. And that change comes from the top, pushing me further into leadership and knowing that, ‘you’re going to make some changes? Okay, you’ve got to be a leader or be perceived as a leader at some level.’” This desire to be part of change seems to have allowed him to embrace situations of conflict and to learn from

them in order to more effectively work toward change. Several of the other leaders also talked about the desire to have an impact or make a difference. Several of their statements are provided below as examples. “It’s really something where I can have an impact on their lives.” “Having the resources available to me because of my position to help others achieve their path.” “Part of it is wanting to make a difference, wanting to have an impact.” “I know that a leadership position is much more about making an impact and making a difference.” “I’m always looking at how can I contribute to this to make it better?” (quotes from Milt, Terry, Jim, Scott and Robert, respectively).

In addition to wanting to make a difference, many of the leaders expressed that leadership simply felt like the natural thing to do or the logical next step for them, along with this idea others commented that they did not necessarily seek leadership roles out, but rather the roles seemed to come to them. Lynne talked about how she assumed leadership roles throughout her life. “So I certainly took on those (leadership roles) throughout my life, never really thinking about it...I think for me it was about taking responsibility which is a real natural thing for me to do.” Chris articulated it in this way, “...I don’t know, it felt very much like that was the next step.” David spoke of his leadership movement as a process of “accumulation” and that it “just happened to me incrementally.”

As stated above it would seem that how these leaders viewed their movement into leadership as almost inevitable has impacted the way they seek to absorb learning from life experiences. Therefore, it does seem that this is an intervening condition impacting the strategies employed.

### *Role of Mentors or Significant Others*

Most of the leaders in the study mentioned either mentors or “significant others” in the process of their leadership journey. Not all of the individuals mentioned as having an impact upon the participants were termed “mentors” therefore, the term significant others was developed as a way of signifying the importance of these individuals without placing words into the mouths of the participants. Mentors do seem to play an important role in many individuals’ lives, however, it could be asked in how this category relates to the central phenomenon. While many examples were provided, those that have been selected for inclusion were those that seemed to truly have an impact in how the participant made meaning and absorbed learning from their significant experiences.

One way in which these individuals seemed to contribute to the participants’ experiences is by being the ones who encouraged them to pursue leadership. Jeff relates this about one of his earliest supervisors: “(he) kind of pushed me towards that (management) kind of early in my career...and there’s lots of things I can be thankful for in having him as my first boss and kind of pushing me, nudging me a little bit forward...” Milt talks about how when he has faced difficult circumstances there has tended to be someone there to encourage and push him. “Usually there’s been somebody to kind of encourage me to keep, to go forward on it.” Pat talked specifically about a new youth pastor he gained when he was in tenth grade and how this young man took an interest in him and encouraged him to become a leader in the church group. Lynne mentioned how she naturally gravitated toward leadership roles but also the importance of mentors for her: “...I also had people that believed I could

do it and that is very influential I think. If you have someone that mentors you, believes you can do it, provides that positive support, it's hard to say no." Many of the other participants spoke fondly of mentors they have had in their careers.

Rachel spoke of her husband and how he had an influence upon her: "...he doesn't do a lot of agonizing over decisions...I tended to be just the opposite. He probably gave me the confidence to go ahead and do some things that I might not have done otherwise." This potentially had an impact on Rachel's handling of her stretch opportunity to lead the site selection committee in 1984. Mary also spoke of how her parents, especially her dad, played an important role as an encourager and a sounding board for ideas and decisions. As she lost both parents the same weekend, this spurred her to seek others who could fill that gap, leading her to pursue further education and eventually leading her into a role as an administrator. Whether directly or indirectly the mentors and significant others in these leaders' lives have helped them absorb learning from several of their life experiences.

### *Leadership Philosophy*

The leadership philosophy or the approach to leadership of these participants is somewhat closely related to the reasons for moving into leadership. However, as the data was analyzed it did seem that there were enough differences between the two areas that they warranted separate categories and could be viewed as separate intervening conditions in relation to the strategies employed for learning from life experiences. One of the strategies that was employed and will be discussed thoroughly in the next section is that of seeking to apply learning from the experience. The leadership philosophy of many of the leaders connects strongly with this strategy

as many of the participants talked about their desire to help others and especially help others grow.

“Leadership really does mean that you are leading other people and you’re working with other people.” Terry seems to agree with Milt’s comment by stating his approach to leadership is, “I try to do it by teaching people.” Many of the leaders from a variety of the organizations, for profit, non profit, educational and religious all mentioned the desire to teach others and bring them along. Robert, the pastor, commented: “I want my leadership to be defined by who I am and to be defined by who I impacted...It’s that satisfaction that I get in what others do and not what I accomplish.” It would seem that this approach to leadership, embraced by many of the participants, seeks to truly absorb learning from their lived experiences. It seemed that by doing so they would be in a better position to teach others and thereby lead others.

As some of the participants testified they learned from experiences of conflict with poor leaders and determined that they would help people from a leadership position. Again, the philosophy of engaging followers and bringing them along with the leader can be seen in relation to these experiences. Lynne specifically mentioned the poor leader she had worked with and talked about her own approach to leadership: “My leadership is really about trying to understand where someone’s coming from and help them be the best they can possibly be...I’d like to think I embody what a servant leader’s really all about. And for me that is about removing barriers for individuals to provide whatever insight and guidance I can.” The philosophy with which an individual approaches leadership seems to have bearing upon how he/she

interprets life experiences as well as how he/she seeks to absorb learning from these experiences and apply it moving forward.

### *View of Development*

The initial purpose in asking a question related to how these leaders viewed their growth and development was related more to comparing formal learning to experiential learning. However as the interviews were conducted and the data analyzed, it seemed that a leader's view of his/her development and growth related to how he/she interpreted life experiences. All of the participants commented on the value they saw in experiential learning as well as how they viewed their leadership development as processes rather than events. Somewhat surprising though was the value that nearly all put on formal learning in conjunction with experiences. Robert's comment regarding the interaction between formal learning and experience seems to capture the view of most of the leaders interviewed. "...formal learning kind of just opens up the door for experience. It provides enough to open up your eyes to what to look for in the experience..."

As already stated, most of the leaders view their leadership growth and development as a process, or as Pam stated, "...slow upward trajectory." David echoed this sentiment in saying, "It's really been a long process of getting a lot of corners knocked off." Pat agrees in commenting that he really learned over the long process of time and he also was concerned in the interview to make sure that he did not portray himself as a leadership expert. He wanted to clearly communicate that he very much feels he is still in the process of learning and growing. Karen agreed in commenting on how her leadership development is not an event but a "progress."

“I’ll learn something new this week about leadership and about what works and doesn’t work.”

Additionally, many of the participants viewed development as a process of trial and error. David stated, “I think you learn from difficult circumstances more than anything.” Scott also felt this way, “...knowing it is more about the learning and the mistakes along the way.” Most of the participants concurred with these sentiments as they talked of how much they had learned from the mistakes they had made along the way, although Karen was quick to point out: “I’ve never failed...it was like Thomas Edison who knows 999 ways how not to make a light bulb. That’s all that is.” While not seeing failure these leaders did view mistakes as a prime opportunity for learning, both for themselves and for others. So the participants’ views of development seem to impact how they interpret their experiences and how they absorb the learning as they view development as a process and, therefore, are more open to learning. Chris’ statement seems to best sum up the views of most of these leaders: “Leadership is messy.”

### *Strategies for Learning from Significant Life Experiences*

Strategies are generally defined within the grounded theory tradition as the “how” by which the participants handle or deal with the central phenomenon. In relation to learning from significant life experiences, the data seemed to support two primary strategies that these effective leaders employed to absorb learning from their lived experiences: reflection and seeking to apply. While these strategies may seem general in nature, further explanation of each follows.



### *Reflection*

Reflection can be defined as any type of intent consideration, particularly if it is calm and lengthy. In relating their stories of significant experiences and even their leadership journeys as a whole, many of the participants related that they had spent time in this type of intense consideration of the various experiences. For some, even the act of reliving the event served as a means of reflecting and the opportunity to further absorb learning from these situations.

While enduring the painful situation of being the “scape-goat” between two parties in conflict, and being called a racist in the process, Chris talked about how this experience caused her to think through the situation. “On the other hand it made me reflect on: was any of it true? And what could I do? And how would the situation play out?” Through this reflection, Chris was able to more fully embrace this very negative situation from a positive standpoint and learn and grow through the experience.

Similarly, Robert talked about how he learned to reflect in the face of criticism. When he became a principal he was taken back by the amount of criticism he faced on a daily basis. However, as he reflected he was reminded of the Biblical story of King David fleeing from his son’s rebellion and how he was falsely accused by a family member of the former king. Robert talks about how this caused him and still causes him to reflect and examine himself when he is the object of criticism. “And I learned an important principle that if somebody comes throwing rocks and cursing me, is that there may be 1% of that that is true and I need to hear it. So I learned a big lesson in humility with that.”

David talked about how his experiences, especially the difficult circumstances, are prime opportunities for reflection and that it is through this means that more learning can be taken and applied in moving forward. Jim's experience of becoming certified as a career and life coach greatly employed the power of reflection as he spent more and more time coming to know himself better. "...it became about self-awareness, about what are my strengths, what is my essence, what am I about." While not all of the leaders specifically used the terminology of "reflection" each of them indicated through their stories that they had spent time in intently considering the various experiences in their lives and seeking to absorb the learning these experiences provided. Through this data it seemed that reflection was a key strategy for the participants in learning from significant life experiences.

### *Seeking to Apply*

While Pete strongly believed in the power of reflection, he was quick to emphasize the importance of not just thinking about the potential learning but applying it. "Because thinking about something without being able to apply any learning moving forward probably doesn't benefit you." This too seemed to be a common theme for these leaders as they lived through their experiences and then sought to take meaning from them and use that meaning in moving forward.

Pat talked about how his faith encourages him to seek to apply life's experiences, especially the painful ones. "It's (tribulation) coming and how are you going to use it? You know, are you going to use it for perseverance and learning about yourself and getting better or not?" In relating his stretch assignment of working hard and planting trees Jeff talked about how he continues to apply the work

ethic developed in that situation to his job today. Rachel was stretched by learning to deal with the national media as well as with learning how to deal with a group of significant and influential party members from around the country. This in turn produced confidence which she was able to apply as she moved into a new and challenging situation of being one of only a few women in her state's legislature.

All of the participants discussed how they had taken valuable lessons learned from experiences and from others over the years and how they have sought to apply that learning. Those who had endured difficult bosses or other situations talked about how they sought to treat people differently. David commented that his encounter with a manipulative supervisor right out of college was actually, "...one of the best experiences I had in preparing for a leadership position." This was because he sought to apply what he had learned negatively from this individual to his own leadership style and to ensure that he treated people fairly and with dignity and respect. Lynne also sought to apply the learning from her manipulative boss as she has endeavored to always be forthright and to embrace the concept of the servant leader. Terry who experienced the negative "encouragement" of a father who constantly told him he would never amount to anything, has sought to ensure that he encourages his own children as well as those with whom he works.

Again, the consistent message from the participants was that they sought to apply learning from difficult situations rather than dwell on the problems and the difficulties. Returning to Pat, he seems to sum up the sentiment of most of the leaders with his comments: "But as I'm going through this, what can I pull out, how can I be better for this junk I have to put up with right now? It will end, it will get better, but

for now, it's what I'm going through and how can I use this later?" This seeking to apply seems to be a strong strategy for dealing with these life experiences and also in helping these leaders to truly take meaning and learning from each of them.

### *Consequences of Strategies for Learning from Significant Life Experiences*

While using the term is consistent with the grounded theory tradition, "consequences" seems a bit strange as a descriptor for the outcome of the strategies employed to learn from life experiences. Often in the common vernacular it seems that "consequences" carries a negative connotation and in contrast with that view, the data seems to indicate positive outcomes for the leaders from the use of the strategies mentioned above. The consequences or outcomes for these leaders seem to be: consideration of others; self-awareness; resiliency; change; embracing of life; confidence; and humility.

### *Consideration of others*

Many of the life experiences of these effective leaders have produced valuable lessons that these leaders have sought to apply and use in their work with others. Some of the more clear applications of considering others has come from those experiences of conflict with others, particularly difficult bosses or parents. David talked about how he learned so much about leadership and working with others from his negative experience with his first supervisor. He has sought to lead in a much different way. "As I've gone forward I've had really strong feelings about the kind of interpersonal environment, the kind of work environment that we've wanted." He also talked about how his personal experience with a childhood handicap has given him a passion to serve others. "I think I understand in a different way because I've

been dependent on others, I've been bed-fast. That kind of serves as the passion that drives my work and kind of forms me."

Terry talked of how he purposed to not carry on the negativity of his father to his own children, rather he has sought to encourage them and those he works with. "Fill them with hope that they would become somebody special." Pam's disability has led her to better understand social justice issues and to reach out to others. "I've just internalized so many values about equality and dignity." Rachel's inspirational experience of reading a novel about apartheid "impacted me tremendously. And probably gave me an acute awareness of social justice issues." Each of these individuals and several others took challenging, difficult and often painful experiences and embraced the learning so they could better help others in the future.

### *Self-Awareness*

The theme of self-awareness seems to be strongly related to the strategy of reflection, as through the process of intense consideration these leaders gained valuable insight into themselves. Chris and Robert both learned to examine themselves in the face of harsh criticism to see if any of it was true. Jim talked about how his coaching experience enabled him to see the leader he wanted to be. "I think all of that allowed me to become more authentic, or really step into my own authenticity."

Through the death of both of her parents in the same weekend and pushed on by a timely question from her leader, Mary took a deep look at herself and examined what she truly wanted to do with her life. As a result of this reflection she grew in her own self-awareness of wanting to move into a principal position and to truly develop

a team atmosphere in her school. Through these life experiences these leaders have been able to better understand themselves and thereby better understand their approach to leadership.

### *Resiliency*

For some of the leaders, one of the main outcomes of their experiences was the ability or perhaps philosophy to bounce back from the challenges or failures that come in the course of living. Lynne learned a strong lesson in resiliency in watching her parents' reactions in the aftermath of the family business burning to the ground. "And years later when I asked my dad, 'Did you ever think about just walking away from it?' And he said, 'Absolutely not! Things happen and you always just move forward.'" Lynne has fully embraced this philosophy of her father's stating, "No matter what happens, no matter what the shock is, no matter how difficult the situation, you move ahead...if there's something I'm afraid of, I move towards it."

Scott who found himself suddenly on his own and married at the young age of 19 also learned not to be afraid of failure. In fact he credits this situation of a young start in life as being one of the lessons that has helped him in his career as an independent consultant. "Finding out that you know, you're not always going to get it perfect, but you know you're going to make it through...It's all okay..I knew it would be okay in the end." Chris too learned resiliency in her difficult experience. After reflecting on herself she states, "And then it made me kind of gain strength to keep going...And so I really had to dig deep and think and learn and grow from that experience."

*Change*

The area of change could also be viewed as the desire to make a difference as several of the leaders expressed this consequence in both ways. Pam was greatly affected by her contraction of polio at a young age, yet she did not become bogged down in self-pity but rather sought to use this experience to bring change for herself and others with disabilities. Helping to create the League of Human Dignity in her hometown, she was instrumental in securing the passage of legislation and gaining funding for various civic improvements and services that would benefit the disabled community. When asked about this she commented, "...everything I did impacted me personally...accessibility in downtown was not an abstract idea...I've often wondered...what causes would I have taken on had I not, had not some of these been pretty personal, you know."

Pete also talked about how his experience as a minority and specifically in the difficult management retreat has encouraged his change efforts. He spoke of how the experience at the retreat, "...really spurred me on, to be more and to do more..." He also realized that, "...I would have to be more assertive in my leadership in that area if anything was going to change. Otherwise status quo would remain." Chris, Pam and Milt all spoke of experiences which opened their eyes to various social justice issues and encouraged them to do more to work change in their communities and their worlds, or as Milt stated, "I wanted to change the world."

*Embrace Life*

Leaders in any organization, particularly in the business world, seem to be more prone to shutting out life and focusing on helping the business or organization to be successful. One of the lessons that some of these leaders learned from their experiences was to develop a deeper appreciation for life and to live it to its fullest. Lynne speaks of an experience she had with a leadership consultant who gave her some feedback and the message she received was, "...this isn't about the doing, it is about the experience. And suddenly I realized that work really should be fun as well." She went on to talk about how this experience lightened her perspective and fundamentally altered the way she approaches life and work.

Through adversity and loss, both Karen and Terry learned to savor every moment. Karen suffered a cerebral aneurism at the age of 34 and now speaks of how that taught her to treasure every moment of life and every interaction with other people. As she stated she learned that, "missions really are important." Terry lost his younger brother in a car accident and this sudden loss has remained with him as a lesson that you can never regain today. "And I didn't want to ever have to think about throwing something away, be it at work or another person or my children or my spouse."

*Confidence*

Some of the leaders, particularly through stretch experiences, gained confidence in their abilities to handle more than they had been. Rachel learned that she could deal with the national media and with important party leaders and as a result was in a better position to run for state office when the opportunity arose. Jeff



gained confidence that he could work hard and that he could fulfill a commitment and in the process learned the value of following through and keeping your word. Pam talked about how through her legislative efforts for the disabled, she also gained the confidence that she could make a difference and learned how to utilize contacts and resources. Most of the leaders spoke of how they felt confident that they could face obstacles and challenges and also seize opportunities that came their way.

### *Humility*

Seemingly in contrast to the previous category of confidence, humility also was a consequence for several of the leaders. It should be noted that this does not stand in contrast to confidence, but rather can coincide. The confidence that these leaders gained was that they could face challenges and that they had the abilities to overcome and to fulfill responsibilities. The humility that they gained seemed to be an underlying theme in that all seemed to want to convey that they have in no way arrived as a leader.

As stated above, Pat wanted to emphasize very strongly that he was not setting himself up as a super leader and that he was still very much in the process of growing and developing. Milt, after the interview and as he was escorting the researcher out of his office made sure that there was an understanding that he too had not arrived and that he was growing and developing. Robert specifically talked about how his experience of dealing with criticism was a humbling experience as he learned to examine himself and see if any of the criticism was true. Chris was similar as her experience of being called a racist forced her to pause and examine herself to see if any that were true; this act in itself was a humbling experience. These leaders all

demonstrated the desire to continue learning and growing to be as effective as possible. This was conveyed, not always in words, but quite strongly in their tone and in the way they related their stories.

## Chapter V

### Discussion, Interpretation and Recommendations

#### *Summary of Study*

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of significant life experiences upon the development of perceived effective leaders. While the leadership literature is heavy with research and writing pertaining to the development of leaders and leadership abilities, very little research exists pertaining to the role of life experiences in the development of effective leadership behaviors and thereby effective leaders.

The following question was central to this grounded theory study: How do leaders describe the impact of life experiences upon their development? Eight sub-questions initially led the inquiry: 1) How do these leaders define themselves and their leadership? 2) How do these individuals describe their own leadership growth or development? 3) Are there one or two events in an individual's life that happen to help shape them into the person they are? 4) Was there a certain "preparedness" in the individual's life that enabled them to learn more from these particular events than others? 5) How do these individuals describe their decision (was it a calling, etc) to move into a leadership position? 6) Are there common themes impacting leadership development that emerge from various individuals experiences? 7) Are there common experiences that contribute to the development of certain effective leadership traits or behaviors?

8) Could some or all of these significant life experiences be replicated in a training situation to enhance development of desired leadership traits or behaviors?

The initial focus of the study was to determine if there are truly one or two formative events that occur in the lives of leaders that help develop them into the individuals and leaders that they are. As data was gathered and began to be analyzed, a theory of how effective leaders learn from their life experiences began to emerge. While the data did not point to any single formative event, it did support the idea that significant life experiences impact the development of leaders and that these leaders had utilized strategies in order to absorb learning from these experiences.

The data analysis in this study comprised of open coding in which the researcher read each transcript multiple times and data was organized around main themes. To further support this step in the analysis process, the computer program MaxQDA 2007 was also used. The axial coding process was used as the next step to place relevant themes together to determine the core categories. It was during this process that the central phenomenon of how effective leaders learn from life experiences began to emerge. The final step used the selective coding process to develop the “story line” of the study. The story line dealt with the process by which effective leaders seemed to learn from their respective significant life experiences. A theoretical model describing how leaders make meaning and learn from life experiences was developed. This theoretical model was completed by the causal conditions of the types of experiences had by leaders (adversity/loss; inspirational; stretch assignments; and conflict) and their impact upon the central phenomenon. The context of the experiences (timing; openness to learning by leader; and the personal nature of the experience) and the intervening conditions (family influence; reasons for moving into leadership; role of mentors or significant others; leadership

philosophy; and view of development) influenced the strategies used (reflection and seeking to apply) by the leaders. These strategies then resulted in the consequences of the learning from the experience (consideration of others; self-awareness; resiliency; change; embrace life; confidence; humility).

### *Propositions and Discussion*

The development of the model led to six propositions regarding effective leaders' learning from significant life experiences.

*Proposition 1:* The influence of family plays a significant role in the response of leaders to life experiences.

While research has shown that environmental and genetic factors impact variation in the leadership behaviors and roles in adults, very little research has examined the role of specific life experiences and environmental factors (Avolio, Rotundo & Walumbwa, 2009). While extensive research has been done in the area of parenting, very little research exists exploring the role that parenting plays in the development of leadership behaviors. The findings of this study would seem to indicate that family, in general, and parents, in particular, do play a significant role in the development of certain leadership philosophies or mindsets. While this study does not support a statement regarding specific leadership traits or behaviors, it does indicate that families play a key role in helping leaders view life experiences from learning paradigms.

A recent study by Avolio and colleagues (2009) demonstrated a significant correlation between certain parenting behaviors and the assumption of leadership roles into adulthood. Authoritative parenting behaviors were connected to modest

rule breaking and serious rule breaking to show the relationship between parenting responses to these behaviors and how this potentially impacts future leadership roles (Avolio, et al, 2009). Ultimately Avolio, et al (2009) stated that when parents utilize instances of modest rule breaking as teachable moments, these can help children learn about challenging the status quo and certain boundaries of authority.

In her research of the leadership attributes of successful rural women leaders, Anita Hall (2007) identified family influence as a strong factor in helping the women in her study develop leadership behaviors and attributes. This study too seems to emphasize the importance of parents and other family members encouraging their children to learn from their experiences. Statements by the participants regarding parents serving as educational role models and emphasizing the importance of learning and education provided a consistent theme of family influence as an intervening condition in the model.

*Proposition 2:* Learning from significant life experiences provides a valuable foundational, case-based knowledge that leaders can utilize in times of uncertainty and change.

Common knowledge as well as most learning theory would seem to indicate that life experience is a great teacher and therefore a valuable source of knowledge and information. In the current study, leaders were asked for a general idea of how much of their development they felt came from experience and how much they felt came from formal learning. The lowest percentage of experiential learning was 50% with most of the leaders stating that they felt 70% of their development had come through life experience (one individual stated 90% as his/her level of experience).

The findings of this study then would seem to support the “common knowledge” perspective that experience is important.

Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron and Byrne (2007) explored the role of leader cognition in true-life settings, particularly theorizing regarding the role of leaders’ thinking in crisis situations. Several knowledge structures exist for application by leaders in crisis situations, such as tacit knowledge, schematic knowledge and associational knowledge. However, it seems unlikely that leaders would utilize these areas of knowledge very strongly in a crisis situation as they are primarily context driven (Mumford, et al, 2007). Case-based or autobiographical knowledge on the other hand seems to be a likely candidate for use by leaders in crisis situations (Mumford, et al, 2007). “Case-based, or autobiographical, knowledge represents knowledge abstracted from past experience” (Mumford, et al, 2007; pg. 523).

Connecting the findings from this study with the concepts from Mumford et al (2007) it would seem that these significant life experiences may provide a fruitful ground for the development of case-based knowledge and consequently an opportunity to further develop leaders’ abilities to face uncertainty and change within their organizations.

*Proposition 3:* Significant life experiences can serve as the trigger point for the development of Authentic Leadership.

In their theory of Authentic Leadership Development (or ALD) laid out in *The High Impact Leader* (2006) Avolio and Luthans emphasize the importance of “moments that matter.” These moments can range from large to small and happen across an individual’s entire life (Avolio & Luthans, 2006). These moments or

“trigger events” (see Chapter 2 for diagram) can be positive or negative events that help move a leader forward toward meeting his/her goals and the goals of others by challenging his/her existing theory or view of leadership.

Within ALD, Avolio and Luthans (2006) attempt to run against the more popular notion of leadership development which is to attend a workshop or seminar of some type and hope to emerge from the other side as a highly effective leader. The authors speculate that if a moratorium were implemented on all leadership development programs around the globe that in fact effective leaders would continue to develop as they continued to simply experience life (Avolio & Luthans, 2006). The contention is that leadership developers should be seeking to support “life’s leadership development program” through emphasizing formative moments or experiences (Avolio & Luthans, 2006).

This study would seem to support the contention by Avolio and Luthans (2006) pertaining to the development of Authentic Leadership. In examining the types of experiences leaders related, a wide variety emerges. These experiences occurred over the course of many years or over a matter of a few hours. They also occurred at many different points in the leaders’ lives and careers and came from a variety of sources. There was also great variety in the types of experiences as some dealt with the death of loved ones and other experiences revolved around the reading of a novel.

Part of the make-up of an authentic leader is that of Psychological Capital (Avolio & Luthans, 2006). This capital which moves beyond personal and social capital is comprised of four capacities or components: hope, optimism, self-efficacy (confidence) and resiliency (Avolio & Luthans, 2006).



Two of the consequences or outcomes from these learning experiences identified in this study were that of confidence and resiliency. The confidence that the leaders within this study discussed was that of having the feeling that they developed necessary skills or abilities to complete tasks and that they then could better do those same tasks in the future. This idea seems to coincide with the Psychological Capital (or PsyCap) capacity of self-efficacy (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2007). Within PsyCap, efficacy is defined as the “confidence to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks” (Luthans, et al, 2007; pg. 3). The confidence talked about by the participants in this study would seem to support this concept as they related stretch assignments or challenging situations that were met and in turn helped them develop the feeling that they could meet future challenging tasks.

Additionally, resiliency was identified as an outcome or consequence of the effective leaders’ learning from their significant life experiences. Within PsyCap, resiliency is defined as the ability to, “...when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond to attain success” (Luthans, et al, 2007; pg. 3). Again, the resiliency identified within this study would seem to coincide with the PsyCap definition of the same. The leaders in the current study spoke of how they learned to face adverse situations and move forward. Those who had faced actual physical difficulties spoke of how they had worked to overcome the difficulties and have been able to turn those experiences into positive learning opportunities.

Based upon this review it would seem that the significant life experiences related in this study could potentially serve as the moments that matter or trigger moments for the further development of Psychological Capital and therefore Authentic Leadership (Luthans, et al, 2007; Avolio & Luthans, 2006).

*Proposition 4:* Significant life experiences can provide a means for developing Emotional Intelligence within leaders.

The concept of Emotional Intelligence (or EI) has seen a sustained level of popularity since it was first introduced to the business world approximately 15 years ago. Popularized and applied to business by the Harvard psychologist Daniel Goleman, EI brought a different perspective to leading and managing as Goleman stated that technical skills, while important, are not nearly as significant as the “soft-skills” of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995; Goleman, 2003). As defined by Goleman (2003) EI is comprised of five components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skill. Brief definitions are provided below for each of these five components (Goleman, 2003):

1. Self-awareness: ability to recognize and understand your moods, emotions and drives and the effect they have on others.
2. Self-regulation: the ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods.
3. Motivation: passion to work for reasons other than money.
4. Empathy: understanding the emotional makeup of other people and treating them accordingly.

5. Social skill: proficiency in managing relationships and building networks, ability to lead change.

While EI can be learned and developed, Goleman (2003) acknowledges that it is not easy to do so, it takes time and is best viewed as a process. This study would seem to support the idea that the significant life experiences of leaders can be utilized to help develop emotional intelligence in the same leaders. This could be done through current experiences a leader is having and by also reflecting on past experiences to better absorb meaning and learning from them.

In examining again the consequences of how leaders learned from the life experiences in this study, or what was learned, many of the traits of EI can be seen. Several of the leaders clearly stated that they felt they had gained deeper levels of self-awareness through their experiences and that they were better in touch with themselves and consequently their drives, motivations, emotions and moods. As one looks at the descriptions of the experiences in this study and the lessons learned and lays them over the components of EI, it can also be seen that the leaders in this study spoke of self-regulation as they learned to control their own responses in certain circumstances and then to use those as greater passions or motivation to drive change.

The statements from these leaders regarding why they wanted to lead and also how they learned to consider others more carefully speaks to the ideas of motivation and empathy within EI. Finally, many of the leaders spoke of how they wanted to be change agents, making a difference and having an impact. The component of social skill within emotional intelligence speaks to the ability to manage relationships and is often seen in effectiveness at leading change. The lessons learned through these life

experiences in this study seemed to better position and enable the effective leaders to more successfully lead change within their organizations. It seems that the significant life experiences related by the leaders in this study could be further explored as prime opportunities for the further development of emotional intelligence and consequently one could surmise that other leaders have similar experiences that could also serve to more fully develop those leaders' emotional intelligence.

*Proposition 5:* The strategy of reflection used by leaders in significant life experiences can be utilized as an effective learning tool in leadership development.

One could argue that the concept of reflection has been popular and in use since the beginning of time; indeed the Delphi oracle proclaimed “know thyself” thousands of years ago. It is a commonly known fact that many of the United States' founding fathers were avid journal keepers which is itself an activity of reflection. In 1990, Peter Senge introduced the concept of the “learning organization” which essentially means an organization comprised of individuals who are active and life-long learners. One of the methods recommended by Senge (1990) is that of reflection or reflective practice. This idea has been incorporated by many organizations, particularly within the academic field (Cooper & Stevens, 2006).

While reflection can occur in a variety of ways, one method that many have found helpful and highly effective is the act of journal keeping or reflective writing (Cooper & Stevens, 2006; Lizzio & Wilson, 2007). While recognizing that reflection in and of itself does not guarantee learning, reflection that is of quality and sufficiently “deep” can help to ensure deeper levels of understanding. Lizzio and Wilson (2007) conducted a study of final year behavioral science students in which

the students were required to critically reflect on their practices. This particular study utilized a self-managed, guided reflective workbook process. The findings from this study were positive; the students found particular value in those reflective practices that assisted them in connecting insights from critical incidents to wider patterns of behavior (Lizzio & Wilson, 2007).

Similarly Cooper and Stevens (2006) conducted a qualitative analysis of the journal keeping of four higher education professionals. These individuals were already regular journal keepers and the researchers sought to examine their journals over a period of time to determine the value received (Cooper & Stevens, 2006). Ultimately, the study found that the journal keeping seemed to help these professional adults cope more effectively with the multiple demands of work and life as well as helping them to reflect on overall career goals (Cooper & Stevens, 2006).

While none of the leaders in this current study specifically mentioned journal keeping as their preferred reflection method, reflection seemed to be strongly used as a strategy for absorbing learning from significant life experiences. Several of the leaders commented on the value they found in taking the time to consider carefully the lived experience and to contemplate what the broader meaning and application might be for them. These concepts are consistent with the findings of the two journal keeping studies mentioned above (Cooper & Stevens, 2006; Lizzio & Wilson, 2007).

It is believed that with some additional help and guidance, leaders who are experiencing significant life events could learn to utilize a journal to facilitate their reflection and potentially increase the learning from these experiences. While these experiences may not always be known, certain experiences such as key life or career

transitions, stretch assignments or others are known and reflective journal keeping could be utilized.

*Proposition 6:* Significant life experiences, as related in this study, may serve as means to develop the Servant Leadership characteristics of altruistic calling, emotional healing and wisdom.

While the concept of servant leadership has been around for some time and Greenleaf (1970) was the first modern author to really utilize that term, it has only been recently that the concept of servant leadership has begun to be researched and studied in the academic realm. A 2006 study by Barbuto and Wheeler identified five characteristics of servant leadership: altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping and organizational stewardship. While work continues to be done to refine these characteristics and to further explore this concept of servant leadership, this study did provide a framework within which servant leadership can be studied. This study regarding how effective leaders learn from significant life experiences seems to indicate that the lessons learned or consequences of these life experiences have the potential to develop some of the characteristics of servant leadership as identified by Barbuto and Wheeler (2006).

Altruistic calling is described as a leader's desire to make a difference in the lives of others (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). One of the categories of consequences or lessons learned that emerged in this study was that of "consideration of others." This result often came through the experience of conflict with a poor example of a leader, but the leaders in this study took that experience and realized the need to serve others

and create a positive environment for them. This would indicate a development of the characteristic of altruistic calling.

Emotional healing describes leaders who have the ability to foster spiritual recovery from trauma or hardship; these leaders also tend to be great listeners and display empathy (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). Again in this study as these leaders experienced periods of adversity or loss, they seemed to develop that ability to empathize with others and to desire to help others who are struggling. Servant leaders also have the characteristic of wisdom which is the ability to not only read the situation or pick up environmental cues but also understand the implications of this (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). While the consequences noted in this study do not speak directly to this characteristic, it would seem that these leaders developed an ability to think more broadly as a result of their experiences. Whereas prior to these experiences they may have had a more limited view of their world, following the experiences many of them seemed to have the ability to see and think more broadly, which would seem to support the development of the characteristic of wisdom.

#### *Significance in the Literature*

Research pertaining to leadership development methods, philosophy and effectiveness has been around for many years. Much of the existing literature has sought to explore the results of targeted or specific developmental or training programs (Conger, 1992; Fulmer, 1997; Day, 2001). With the increase in interest in positive forms of leadership over the last 30 to 40 years, more focus has been placed upon leadership development rather than just leadership training (Conger, 1992; Fulmer, 1997; Day, 2001).

The research on the impact of life experiences upon the development of leaders has not been nearly as strong nor as prevalent. In more recent years there has been an increased interest in exploring the impact that life experiences potentially have upon leadership development (Avolio, 1994; Shamir, et al, 2005; Bennis & Thomas, 2001; Thomas 2008). However, these studies have been limited to only a handful of scholars, resulting in a field of opportunity for further research.

This study has attempted to help fill the gap in research on the life experiences of effective leaders and how these same experiences may impact their overall leadership development. By examining the learning that effective leaders take and apply from significant life experiences, this researcher hopes to stimulate even more research into this area. It is hoped that not only will this study contribute to the scholarly field of research but that also the application to the field of practice will be seen and utilized.

#### *Limitations*

As with any study, there are certain limitations to this work. One limitation is the sample size used. While 15 participants are a sufficient number for a good grounded theory study, it would only stand to benefit this current research to conduct a similar study with a larger sample size. Additionally a limitation is the geographic region of the study. While efforts were made to obtain a geographically diverse sample, still the majority of the participants were located within one of two Midwestern states. Again, the study would benefit from seeking leaders from an even more diverse region to determine if there are certain regional characteristics or qualities that emerged in this particular study.



A final limitation that should be noted arose inadvertently in the course of the study. Once participants were identified and contacted, it became clear that many of the participants were from the same broad generational grouping. While this limits the potential application of this study, it also potentially opens another door for research to determine if there are differences in how the various generations interpret and learn from significant life experiences.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research*

Some implications for future research are seen in the propositions offered earlier. Additionally, as demonstrated above several possibilities for additional research exist in this area. This study should be replicated with a larger sample size in order to further verify the theoretical model developed in this study as well as to explore additional components which may be revealed in a larger data set. While organizational and personal diversity was established, it would also be beneficial to replicate this study with a more geographically diverse population, potentially broadening to a cross-cultural comparison to determine if the model holds across geographical and cultural boundaries. Also as noted above, a potentially interesting study would be to compare generations in regard to the types of experiences related as significant as well as in relation to the strategies used to make meaning of the experiences and then the consequences realized through the strategies. A study of this nature could help provide insight in regard to the timing of certain types of experiences especially in regard to openness to learning at the different stages of life.

There was one grouping of data from this study that holds potential for further study. These leaders were asked regarding their “leadership journey” and were asked to trace their path of leadership from their earliest experience up to their current position. Nearly all of the participants spoke of their earliest leadership experiences occurring in high school or college and generally involved some type of elected position or revolved around athletics. Avolio’s study (1994) pursued this line of research via a forced choice survey and was limited to exploring characteristics of transformational leadership. Based upon the findings from this study, there is potential for further exploration of the formative and predictive power of these early leadership experiences.

A final potential study is recommended that aligns with the leadership, rhetoric and potentially literature fields of study. Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* published in 1949 has come to be viewed as the seminal work on comparative mythology and advances Campbell’s theory of the “heroic journey.” Campbell’s theory regarding the heroic journey is summed up in the following quote: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (Campbell, 2008, pg. 23). A potential study exists in analyzing how effective leaders describe their leadership journeys with particular attention being paid to the descriptions of significant life experiences. This data could be collected through the leaders’ journal writings or even biographical writings and then analyzed in comparison to Campbell’s theory of the heroic journey. Some of the experiences

and the resulting lessons learned, as described by the leaders in this study, often reminded the researcher of Campbell's work. This type of study could potentially provide insight into the self-concept of effective leaders and how this impacts their interpretation of life experiences.

### *Recommendations for Practice*

One of the biases that this researcher brought to this study was that of a practitioner in the leadership development field. Employment as a leadership development advisor to identified high-potential leaders in a major national corporation greatly contributed to the researcher's interest in this field of study. Unfortunately the researcher has seen fewer rather than more of the leaders he works with walk away from seemingly significant experiences with very little, if any, change.

The potential for the application of this study in the field of practice is significant. One potential application is for leadership advisors, coaches or even mentors to rising leaders to spend time assisting these leaders in reflecting on their past life experiences. As was seen in this study the power of reflection assists leaders in absorbing learning from experience and consequently in developing greater self-awareness as well as examining other potential areas for application of valuable lessons. A particular exercise that the researcher participated in was to write a brief life history focusing on key turning points, or what could be viewed as significant life experiences. In a private session a coach then asked the researcher to explain in more detail about these experiences and to relate why they were important to him. This process helped provide deeper insight into self as well as to gain a renewed purpose

on some long-forgotten commitments. A similar exercise could be conducted focusing on the type of life experiences mentioned in this study as it stands to validate the power of reflecting on the same.

A second application that appears from this study is the value of “guided experience” in the lives of developing leaders. While significant life experiences cannot always be controlled and it would be suggested that they should not always be, there are certain events which are more within the sphere of control of both leaders and those helping them to develop. Using such stretch assignments or career transitions as valuable learning opportunities should be sought by practitioners in the field. By employing reflective strategies mentioned in this study and using the findings in this study to assist with other strategies as well as to guide potential questions, practitioners can potentially offer more assistance and guidance to those developing leaders with whom they work.

Another application exists for those in the area of leadership education, particularly on college campuses. Within these courses, students can be required to engage in reflective journaling for the purpose of absorbing meaning from their life experiences. Additionally, while one would not wish for these students to face the more adverse or difficult types of experiences outlined in this study, students can be encouraged to pursue what has been termed here as “stretch assignments.” By volunteering for projects or work that will stretch them beyond their comfort zones, these leaders have the potential to maximize the learning available on college campuses. Through requirements to engage in community service or service learning type projects, these students also may be able to absorb learning from both stretch and

inspirational experiences. Beyond reflecting on these experiences, leadership educators should also assist students in seeking to apply what they learn through these experiences. If these students can develop these habits while they are young, they will be better positioned to take full advantage of future learning opportunities.

### *Conclusion*

This study began as an exploration of the significant life experiences of leaders who have been perceived as effective. In the spirit of full disclosure, the researcher had hoped to discover that there were one, two or maybe even three formative events in the lives of these leaders that were their turning points. The hope was to find that “moment of truth” when all became clear to the leader and their path was straight before them. However, this treasure was not to be discovered.

Rather a treasure of a different sort revealed itself in the data and in the interviews and encounters with these leaders. The treasure that revealed itself was a method by which these leaders learned from a variety of significant life experiences some being long journeys others being single points in time. Many of these leaders described themselves as learners and the stories that they related bore testimony to this fact as they not only related significant experiences, some painful, some challenging, all meaningful, but they also related what they had learned and how they had grown as a result of these experiences. The researcher found himself drawn in time and again to the stories and identifying with one of the leaders who commented that as a child he always wanted to “ask just one more question.”

The most important discovery of the study was to see how these leaders took meaning from their experiences and used the meanings to better lead and to better serve. The participant Pete best summed the approach of seemingly all the leaders: “But I think that real growth comes in taking that knowledge, coupling it with experience and turning it into wisdom.” These effective leaders have truly learned how to turn their many experiences into wisdom for leadership.

## Chapter VI

### Journal Article for Research Study

Written for *Career Education Review*

Note: This sample article follows the format and guidelines for submission to the *Career Education Review*.

#### Significant Life Experiences:

##### Maximizing Learning Opportunities for Leadership Development

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#### Abstract

Utilizing a grounded theory approach, this research study interviewed identified effective leaders from a diverse organizational population regarding the leaders' significant life experiences. Four general types of experiences were identified: (1) experiences of adversity or loss; (2) experiences of stretch or challenging assignments; (3) inspirational experiences; and (4) experiences of conflict. Additionally strategies employed by these leaders to maximize these experiences as learning opportunities were identified from the data. Utilizing this knowledge of types of experiences and strategies employed by these leaders, it is recommended that those developing and supporting rising leaders within career colleges seek to help these leaders apply these strategies to their own lived experiences to better ensure the development of future leaders.

## Introduction

It would seem that effective leaders are constantly in demand in society as a whole and within individual organizations. This is no less true in viewing the landscape of career colleges and institutions. And while leadership has been a subject of interest and study for seemingly thousands of years, there is still much to be discovered in regard to leadership development, and particularly how leaders can develop a more effective style as they seek to lead their organizations in times of rapid change. Based upon the volumes that have been written regarding leaders and leadership, it appears that two general questions are continually asked and have yet to be satisfactorily answered:

- 3) What is leadership? and
- 4) How do leaders develop? or From where do leaders come?

### *Significance of the Study*

The intent of this study was to explore the lived experiences of effective leaders and to seek to understand how these leaders absorbed learning from these experiences. Of particular interest were those experiences which the leaders determined were “significant” in their development, meaning that they were times of greater learning or understanding. This study provides a foundation or theoretical base for leaders, leadership developers and mentors of rising leaders to assist them in absorbing learning from past and current experiences and in applying this learning resulting in more effective leadership behaviors.



### *Research Questions*

The central question being asked is: How do leaders describe the impact of significant life experiences upon their development? From this central question, other questions arise:

- 9) How do these leaders define themselves and their leadership?
- 10) How do these individuals describe their own leadership growth or development?
- 11) Are there one or two events in an individual's life that happen to help shape them into the person they are?
- 12) Was there a certain "preparedness" in the individual's life that enabled them to learn more from these particular events than others?
- 13) How do these individuals describe their decision (was it a calling, etc) to move into a leadership position?
- 14) Are there common themes impacting leadership development that emerge from various individuals experiences?
- 15) Are there common experiences that contribute to the development of certain effective leadership traits or behaviors?
- 16) Could some or all of these significant life experiences be replicated in a training situation to enhance development of desired leadership traits or behaviors?

### *Definitions of Terms*

The definition of *leadership* that will be used for this study is:

An "influence relationship among leaders and followers" in which both "raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" while realizing group goals and demonstrating full respect for individual freedom. (Burns, 1978; Rost, 1991)

This definition is strongly based upon the work of James Montgomery Burns (1978) and Joseph Rost (1991) respectively. Burns (1978) was one of the earliest scholars to question the "command and control" paradigm of leadership that dominated the early to mid-twentieth century in Western culture. Burns (1978) believed that most leadership of the time was of the transactional variety, whereas a transforming leader would seek to work with his/her followers so that both are elevated to higher levels. In his comprehensive review of the available leadership literature, Rost (1991) noted that in spite of the nearly fifteen years that had passed since Burns published his seminal work, the "industrial paradigm" still prevailed in the leadership literature. Rost (1991) too emphasized the need for leaders and followers to interact and to push one another to higher levels of morality.

In order to provide clarity for the remainder of this discussion, two other terms, *training* and *development* need to be defined at this time. For the purposes of this discussion, *training* will be defined as the more traditional approach to instruction and learning, involving the transfer of knowledge or skills from a perceived expert to students. The contexts for training can be varied: traditional classroom, self-study, literature and more recently, on-line courses. Again, the key component or

distinction of training is the transfer of knowledge from one source to another (Day, 2001; Fulmer, 1997).

If training is the transfer or “download” of information, knowledge, etc, *development* is the process of an individual acquiring meaning and therefore knowledge, skills, etc from experiences or situations. Development is defined by Kegan (1982) as the “active process of increasingly organizing the relationship of the self to the environment. The relationship gets better organized by increasing differentiations of the self from the environment and thus by increasing integrations of the environment” (p. 113). An oversimplification of the difference between *training* and *development* would then be that *training* tends to be a more passive experience for the learner whereas *development* tends to be a more active experience.

#### Review of Related Literature

Leadership training and development has been a rich area of study for academics and a lucrative field for consultants for the past approximately fifty years (Conger, 1992; Fulmer, 1997). Much of the leadership training and development world has emphasized the transfer of identifiable skills or behaviors that can be delivered in brief training interventions or workshops (Fulmer, 1997; Dixon, 1993; Day, 2001). While providing prime opportunities for students of leadership to gain important content knowledge, many have protested that these brief interventions or what could be termed the “event-based” approach isolates the learner from the real-world and therefore application suffers (Conger, 1992; Fulmer, 1997).

The latter half of the twentieth century as well as the beginning of the next has seen the rise of more of a developmental (see definition above) approach to

leadership education (Fulmer, 1997). Most noticeably the 1980's saw a rise in experiential programs and workshops, designed to move leaders out of the classroom and into a more dynamic learning environment (Conger, 1992). While providing value in the type of environment, as well as moving many leaders out of their comfort zones and into trees or high ropes, the criticism of these programs has been that they are still isolated from the real world or the lived experiences of the learner (Conger, 1992).

Beginning with James Montgomery Burns' (1978) development of the concept of the transforming (or now transformational) leader, many in the leadership field have begun to explore more of the positive types of leadership: transformational, servant, authentic and spiritual (Greenleaf, 1970; Avolio & Luthans, 2006). Coinciding with the development of the positive theories of leadership, interest in the concepts of Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and the learning organization (Senge, 1990) have assisted in shifting the focus in leadership development towards examining the lessons that leaders have learned through experiences in their lives and emphasizing the need to continually learn from these lived experiences.

While common sense would seem to tell us that there is much learning to be absorbed from the experiences we have had, very little research has been conducted in this field to help determine what type of experiences are full of learning and how does one maximize these experiences for their learning potential.

#### Procedures

Participants for this study were sought from a diverse leadership population as one goal of this study was to be able to demonstrate that the development of effective

leaders is not limited to a particular field or discipline, but rather that effective leadership traits and behaviors have the potential for transfer. Names for potential participants were solicited from the author's colleagues in the leadership development field as well as members of the academic community who study and teach in the leadership field.

Criteria used for selection included the following: individual is perceived as an effective leader; individual is currently in a formal leadership role, or has been in the recent past; names were solicited from an organizationally diverse perspective. Ultimately of the 28 names provided for the population, 15 individuals were contacted who met the criteria and these individuals all agreed to participate. The leaders selected represented a diverse population and a total of 4 states and 5 types of organizations (including business, non-profit, government, educational and religious). In addition to the above criteria, participants were also asked to complete the Multi-Factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). The MLQ has been found to be a valid instrument in measuring the 9 factors of Full-Range Leadership (Antonakis, Avolio and Sivasubramaniam, 2003) and has also been found through multiple studies to be a predictor of leadership effectiveness and work group performance (Howell and Avolio, 1993; Lowe, Kroeck and Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Rowold and Heinitz, 2007). Each of the participants scored within either the "effective" or "very effective" categories on the MLQ further validating their effectiveness. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants at sites of their choosing as the primary means of data collection.

### *Data Analysis*

This study utilized the data analysis procedures for grounded theory research as described by Creswell (1998). This research approach calls for three distinct phases of data analysis: open coding; axial coding and selective coding.

#### *Open Coding*

In this phase of analysis, each of the transcriptions were read and initial codes and memos were documented in the margins. Transcripts were also analyzed using qualitative analysis software (MaxQDA 2007) to group similar codes into initial categories.

#### *Axial Coding*

Following open coding, the data set indicated that how effective leaders learned from significant life experiences was the central phenomenon that was emerging. Related to this, major themes or conditions were identified from the data. These major themes were identified as the causal and other conditions that impacted the central phenomenon.

#### *Selective Coding*

In this phase of analysis, the researcher identified the story line that connects the various categories and conditions throughout the emerging theoretical model. The main story line that was revealed in the data was how effective leaders learn from significant life experiences and the strategies that they use to maximize these experiences as learning opportunities.

## Results

The results of this study that seem to have the most bearing upon the practice of leadership development and particularly in how it can be applied to leadership development in the career college are the four types of experiences these leaders had and the strategies they utilized to absorb learning from the same. The complete theoretical model developed from the data is available from the author upon request.

### *Experiences of Adversity or Loss*

The broad descriptive term of “adversity or loss” are terms selected by the author as he felt they best described the feelings that were communicated by the leaders as they told their stories. These stories detail experiences in which the leader him/herself either lost a loved one or they experienced some form of personal adversity. Mary (note: all names used are pseudonyms to protect anonymity), a recently retired school administrator, related how she lost both parents within the same weekend. She described how close she was to her parents and how she particularly relied upon her dad for guidance and advice and then suddenly both parents were gone within a few days of one another. Another participant talked of how he and his wife had lost an infant daughter: “...the thing that defines me to some point and that is we lost a, a child. She was an infant at the time.” Pat went on to talk about the pain that this experience brought him, yet how he sought to find answers and lessons even in this tragic circumstance.

Other participants talked about the adversity they faced in the form of personal physical difficulties. Pam contracted polio at a very young age and relates that “without a doubt” her “disability...has affected and does affect really every

area...” of her life. In 1952 on her sixth birthday, Pam was admitted to the hospital with polio and she remained hospitalized for thirteen months. She related how this event not only has had a life-time impact upon her, but how her farming parents learned quickly to deal with circumstances that the other farm families around them were not faced with, yet they were always loving and supporting. Another participant related the story of suffering a cerebral aneurism at the age of 34 and not being expected to live, or at least to be left in a vegetative state, yet she went on to say that she is so glad this happened to her. Other stories of painful maladies, businesses burning to the ground and loss were related by these leaders, yet each of them went on to speak of the important lessons of perseverance, treasuring life, understanding the struggles of others and humility that were learned in each of these situations.

### *Stretch Assignments*

A second type of causal condition that was seen in the data is what this author has termed as “stretch assignments.” These are experiences that seem to have pushed or “stretched” the participant harder or further than they had been before, yet through these experiences they were able to learn valuable insights about themselves and valuable leadership lessons.

Jeff related a story from his childhood where he learned the value of seeing a job through and accountability to commitments. He was recruited to help plant trees to create windbreak and he wanted to do this task, but his father knew he had difficulty in seeing tasks through to completion. Knowing Jeff wanted to play baseball that summer, his father used this opportunity to emphasize the importance of following through on commitments and hard work. He made a deal with Jeff that he



could only play baseball if he followed through on his commitment to help plant the trees. "...I went out and worked hard. I mean there were long days, we worked and planted all these trees...and of course I was just younger than probably what most would be in that situation." While a seeming simple childhood story, Jeff talks about how this experience and reflecting upon it has helped him in his leadership commitments and project work in the customer service organization in which he works.

Other leaders related experiences which stretched their comfort and confidence levels. One participant was asked to serve as a chair for the site selection committee for her political party's national convention during a presidential election year. Through this experience she gained valuable confidence in her ability to work with members of the national media as well learning how to influence significant members of her party. She credits this experience in helping her gain the confidence and abilities she needed as she eventually ran for a state legislature position, and won. Other participants found themselves working on important legal issues at both the state and local levels, learning how to network and use those connections to accomplish goals. Others took on stretch assignments by delving into new areas of education and training and then seeking to apply this new knowledge in the workplace to help their direct reports as well as the overall organizational climate. Nearly all of the leaders who had experienced these stretch assignments talked about how they had learned not to fear failure or making mistakes, but rather seeing those opportunities for themselves and for others as chances to learn and grow even more.

### *Inspirational Experiences*

A third category of significant life experience that emerged from the data was that of inspirational experiences. In these stories leaders talked of how an event or individual inspired them to do more and be more and many of them view these experiences as significant points in their development. One leader talked of how reading the book *Cry the Beloved Country* as a young adult inspired her to take more action in the Civil Rights movement in this country; other participants talked about leaders they had in the past who saw potential in them and inspired them to pursue leadership and in turn develop others.

### *Conflict Experience*

One type of experience that kept emerging in the stories related by the participants was that of learning from conflict with other individuals. Sometimes these individuals were family members, sometimes they were bosses and other times the conflict was with general groups of people. In spite of these difficult and sometimes painful experiences, these leaders were able to draw meaning out of them and move forward in their own development.

One participant talked of a management retreat he attended which quickly deteriorated into a “white versus minority” situation. Being a minority, he had worked for change within his organization and had felt they had made great strides. While this experience was painful personally to him, rather than wallow in self-pity or accuse others, he used this situation to spur him on to continue striving for change and to realize that there was still much to be done in regard to tolerance and diversity. Another individual talked about the criticism he experienced when he moved into a

principal role in a high school. He had served as the athletic director and a coach for many years in this same school and felt he had a strong relationship with many families and faculty members. He was unprepared for the level of scrutiny and criticism that came with the new role. Again, he used this as an opportunity to reflect on his actions and to determine where the criticism was justified and how he could improve his own leadership to better address the concerns of all the parties within the school community.

### *Strategies*

While the stories that these leaders related were of great interest, what became even more important and consequential in the research was the strategies used by these individuals in turning difficult and often painful situations into prime learning opportunities. The data seemed to reveal two primary strategies used by the participants: reflection and desire to apply. Initially these strategies may seem underwhelming and very broad, however through further explanation it will be shown how these truly were valuable tools for absorbing learning from the experiences.

In regard to reflection, research has shown the value of reflection by both students and professionals as a means to solidify learning from experience (Cooper & Stevens, 2006; Lizzio & Wilson, 2007). The application of reflection in this study was not haphazard, but rather it involved the intentional contemplation by the leaders on the experience with a focus of what they could learn from each one. Often this reflection involved a large degree of self-examination to determine how they could improve or change personally as a result of the experience.

The desire to apply the learning from their lived experiences was strong for the leaders in this study especially as a following step to reflection. As one stated, “Because thinking about something without being able to apply any learning moving forward probably doesn't benefit you.” The application that these leaders sought went beyond self and went beyond thinking of how they could be more successful in the future. Rather the comments of the leaders pointed toward seeking to apply the learning in a way that would benefit the people with whom they worked and their organizations as a whole. They sought to be generous in sharing the learning they had the privilege of gaining.

#### Recommendations for Practice

As a professional in the leadership development field charged with helping identified high-potential leaders in a major national corporation gain valuable skills that will better prepare them to lead the organization, this author has a strong interest in the possibilities for application to practice that arise out of this study. Additionally the author also is a facilitator of online courses designed specifically for the development of career college administrators and leaders. While this study did not explore leadership within the specific context of the career college setting, it did seek an organizationally diverse population which lends to the ability to generalize the findings.

The most significant application the author sees for the career college is the opportunity to maximize life experiences, particularly those in the category of “stretch assignment.” While all of the experiences detailed in this study should be utilized for learning, obviously there are those that we would not seek to replicate or

imitate. It goes without saying that we would not wish the death of loved ones or a physical malady on any individual. However, stretch or challenging assignments are within the sphere of control of individuals, particularly current leaders who are seeking to develop others. Through the strategic use of these stretch assignments for rising leaders within the career colleges, leadership development and ability can be greatly enhanced. A few recommendations for maximizing these opportunities are detailed below:

1. Match stretch assignments to the development needs and career goals of the individual. Rather than randomly assigning projects or committee work, seek opportunities that will use existing talents and abilities while at the same time forcing the individual to reach beyond them and further develop.
2. As the individual is going through the assignment or experience, actively engage him/her in reflective activities. While reflection can occur on an individual basis and can be as simple as thinking over events or actions, often guided reflection carries a greater impact. The use of intentional development or coaching conversations can be used to help the individual reflect on what is going well in the current situation as well as to explore areas for improvement. The act of journal keeping is another excellent method of reflection and has been research proven as an effective method (Cooper & Stevens, 2006).
3. Encourage and emphasize regular application of new concepts learned in the experience. This again can occur through the strategic use of

developmental or coaching conversations. The individual should be encouraged to take a lesson learned during the experience and immediately apply it and test out the new idea.

4. Finally, provide an environment of innovation and experimentation.

While no one seeks to fail nor desires to do so, it should be stated that mistakes will be made. Allow the individual the freedom to make errors and mistakes, then quickly help them to reflect and take learning and application even from the mistakes.

### Conclusion

Life experiences provide a fertile ground of learning opportunities, the challenge rests in taking these opportunities and absorbing the learning from each one. As one participant in the study observed: "...I think that real growth comes in taking knowledge, coupling it with experience and turning it into wisdom." Effective leaders have learned how to turn their many experiences into wisdom for leadership.

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Appendix A  
IRB Approval Letter

## Appendix A

## IRB Approval Letter



May 14, 2009

Ryan Meers  
Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication  
5363 NW Tudor Ln Lincoln, NE 68521

Leverne Barrett  
Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication  
300 AGH UNL 68583-0709

IRB Number: 2009059384 EP  
Project ID: 9384  
Project Title: Significant Life Events: A Narrative Research Study of the Impact of  
Significant Live Events on the Development of Effective Leaders

Dear Ryan:

This letter is to officially notify you of the approval of your project by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. It is the Board's opinion that you have provided adequate safeguards for the rights and welfare of the participants in this study based on the information provided. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46).

Date of EP Review: 04/08/2009

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Final Approval: 05/14/2009. This approval is Valid Until: 05/13/2010.

1. The approved informed consent form has been uploaded to NUgrant (Meers ICF-Approved.pdf file). Please use this form to distribute to participants. If you need to make changes to the informed consent form, please submit the revised form to the IRB for review and approval prior to using it.

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side

effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;

- Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

For projects which continue beyond one year from the starting date, the IRB will request continuing review and update of the research project. Your study will be due for continuing review as indicated above. The investigator must also advise the Board when this study is finished or discontinued by completing the enclosed Protocol Final Report form and returning it to the Institutional Review Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 472-6965.

Sincerely,



Mario Scalora, Ph.D.  
Chair for the IRB





Appendix B  
Contact Letter

Appendix B  
Contact Letter



Date

Participant's Name

Participant,

I am writing to request your help in conducting a study regarding the development of identified effective leaders. This study is part of the research I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation; in addition to this I am hoping to use the information gained to discover how to more effectively develop leaders now and in the future.

Your name has been given to me by **contact name** as someone who meets the criteria of being an effective leader within your respective group or organization. As a perceived effective leader I would love to have you participate in this study to provide further insight into your own development to where you are today.

I can assure you that the time commitment for this study will be very minimal on your part and I will do all I can to ensure a smooth process. Your participation would involve the following, minimal steps:

- Response to myself indicating an interest in participation
- Brief initial phone call to discuss the study in a little more detail, answer any questions you may have and to set up some meeting times
- Completion of a brief leadership survey by yourself and a few individuals selected by yourself. Average time to complete this survey is approximately 20 minutes.
- Participation in an interview with myself—this interview should only take approximately 45-60 minutes.

All results from this interview will be kept confidential and will only be used in the final report of the data. If you wish, we can also arrange a time to debrief the results from the leadership survey as a means of your ongoing development and growth. This meeting would not be part of the data collection, but is rather a side benefit offered to you in gratitude for your participation. Participation in this study is completely voluntary but it would be of a great help to me and to the future development and success of leaders in various organizations within our community.

I have enclosed a copy of the informed consent form I will be using for this study. This copy is to provide you with further information and you do not need to complete or return to me at this time. If you should desire to participate in the study I will arrange for you to sign and return the form to me in preparation for the interview.

If you wish to participate in the study or would like further information, please contact me as I would be more than happy to discuss with you further. You can reach me by phone at (402)450-2955 or by email at [ryan.meers.nzs0@statefarm.com](mailto:ryan.meers.nzs0@statefarm.com) or [rmeers08@windstream.net](mailto:rmeers08@windstream.net). You may also contact my advisor at the University of Nebraska, Dr. Leverne Barrett at [lbarrett@unlnotes.unl.edu](mailto:lbarrett@unlnotes.unl.edu) or (402)472-9791.

Thank you so much for your willingness to help with this important study.

**Ryan P Meers**  
(primary investigator)

**Dr. Leverne Barrett**  
(secondary investigator)

Appendix C  
Informed Consent Form

## Appendix C Informed Consent Form



INSTITUTE OF AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES  
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL LEADERSHIP,  
EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Project Title:** Significant Life Events: A Narrative Research Study of the Impact of Significant Life Events on the Development of Effective Leaders

**Purpose of Study:**

This is a research project that will explore the impact of significant life events on the development of leaders who have been identified as being effective in their roles. You have been identified as a leader who is considered effective and therefore you are invited to participate in this completely voluntary project.

Participation in this study will require approximately 2 hours of your time. You will be asked to complete a self-report of the Multi-Factor Leadership Questionnaire in addition to having 4-5 others (preferably individuals who have observed you in a leadership role) complete this survey on your behalf. Those individuals completing the surveys on your behalf will not have access to any of the data from the study; in addition their responses will be kept anonymous.

Following completion of the survey you will be asked to participate in an interview (which will be recorded on audio tape) with the primary researcher regarding your leadership development. The interview will take place at a location of your choosing that works best for your comfort, privacy and convenience.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. In the event of problems resulting from participation in the study, psychological treatment is available on a sliding fee scale at the UNL Psychological Consultation Center, telephone (402) 472-2351.

It is believed that by participating in this study you will have an opportunity to reflect on those events that have enabled you to develop into the effective leader that you are today. Much has been written about the value of reflection and it can serve to further enhance your ongoing growth and development. In addition to reflection, if you wish a time will be set up with the primary investigator to debrief the results of your assessment and this information can in turn be used in your ongoing development.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's office and will only be seen by the investigator during the study and 1 year after the study is complete. The information obtained in this study may be published in academic journals or presented at leadership meetings but the data will be reported as aggregated data. The audiotapes will be erased after transcription.

**If you have questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may call the investigator at any time, office phone, (402) 327-5863, or after hours (402) 450-2955. Please contact the investigator:

- if you want to voice concerns or complaints about the research
- in the event of a research related injury



Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 for the following reasons:

- you wish to talk to someone other than the research staff to obtain answers to questions about your rights as a research participant
- to voice concerns or complaints about the research
- to provide input concerning the research process
- in the event the study staff could not be reached.

**Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_ Check if you agree to be audio taped during the interview.

**Signature of Participant:**

\_\_\_\_\_ *Signature of Research Participant* \_\_\_\_\_ *Date*

**Name and Phone number of investigator(s)**

*Ryan P Meers*

*Leverne Barrett, PhD Secondary Investigator*

*Office: (402) 327-5863*

*Office (402) 472-9791*

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## Appendix D

## Table 4—Participants' Multi-Factor Leadership Questionnaire Results

## Appendix D

Table 4—Participants' Multi-Factor Leadership Questionnaire Results

Leader Name	Inclusive Vision	Inspirational Motivation	Innovative Thinking	Individualized Consideration	Extra Effort	*Organizational Effectiveness	**Satisfaction
Mary	3.44	3.75	3.31	3.44	3.83	3.56	3.88
Chris	3.72	4.00	3.38	3.75	3.33	3.94	3.88
Robert	3.50	2.58	3.17	3.58	3.33	3.38	3.67
Jeff	3.10	3.15	3.20	3.25	3.20	3.55	3.80
Rachel	3.63	4.00	3.88	3.50	4.00	3.88	3.75
Jim	3.16	3.50	3.00	3.31	2.83	3.06	2.88
David	3.70	3.65	3.30	3.20	3.40	3.60	3.60
Pam	3.33	3.40	2.81	3.75	3.50	3.50	3.90
*Terry	2.84	2.81	2.08	2.94	2.58	2.63	2.63
Pete	3.35	3.00	2.75	2.80	2.67	2.63	3.20
Lynne	3.69	3.75	3.56	3.44	3.42	3.69	3.75
Pat	3.55	3.65	3.45	3.55	3.73	3.60	3.90
Karen	3.81	3.94	3.81	3.69	3.92	3.63	3.88
Scott	3.35	3.40	3.40	3.60	3.60	3.35	3.80
Milt	3.50	3.75	3.25	3.00	3.17	3.00	3.00

**Key 1: Leadership types and amount of extra effort**

0 = Not at all  
 1 = Once in a while  
 2 = Sometimes  
 3 = Fairly often  
 4 = Frequently, if not always

**\*Key 2: Relations to Higher-ups & effectiveness**

0 = Not effective  
 1 = Only slightly effective  
 2 = Effective  
 3 = Very effective  
 4 = Extremely effective

**\*\*Key 3: Satisfaction**

0 = Very dissatisfied  
 1 = Somewhat dissatisfied  
 2 = Neither  
 3 = Fairly satisfied  
 4 = Very satisfied

Note: Participant scores relating to categories of Transactional Leadership were not reported in this table.

\*While the participant Terry's scores were lower than the other participants, they still rated in the "sometimes" categories regarding the Transformational Leadership characteristics and he rated as "effective" in regard to organizational effectiveness. This combined with his meeting of the other criteria led to his inclusion in the study.



Appendix E  
Interview Protocol

## Appendix E Interview Protocol

Name of Participant  
Date of Interview  
Location of Interview  
Informed Consent Form?

### Significant Life Events Leadership Development Study: Interview Protocol Revised

- 1) Can you briefly tell me about where you grew up, a little about your family, etc?
- 2) When did you first become aware of your leadership ability? And then how did you move into what you consider your first leadership position?
- 3) From that first leadership position what has been your path to your current situation?
- 4) How do you define yourself and your leadership?
- 5) How would you describe your leadership growth or development?
- 6) What (generally speaking) amount has been gathered through formal learning & what amount through life experience?
- 7) What one event in your life do you feel has had the greatest impact upon making you the person you are?
  - How do you feel this event has impacted you?
  - Do you feel there was a certain “preparedness” in your life that enabled you to learn more from this event than others? What surrounded this event that may have prepared you?
- 8) What one event in your life do you feel has had the greatest impact upon making you the leader that you are?
  - How do you feel this event has impacted you?
  - Do you feel there was a certain “preparedness” in your life that enabled you to learn more from this event than others? What surrounded this event that may have prepared you?
- 9) How do you describe your decision (was it a calling, etc) to move into a leadership position?

## Interview Protocol for Significant Life Events Study

1. Please briefly describe your background or your “story” (where you grew up; extra-curricular activities; college?; career path, etc)
2. What is most important to you? Why?
 

**For Follow Up**

  - 1) Has this always been the most important thing to you?
  - 2) If not, how did it used to be?
  - 3) When do you feel that shifts occurred? Why?
3. Please describe for me 1 or 2 experiences in your life, at any point in your life, that you would define as significant, meaning you feel they had a formative impact on your personal development.
 

**For Follow Up**

  - 1) What did you learn from this?
  - 2) How were you different after the event?
  - 3) Why do you believe this experience had an impact on you?
4. Do you consider yourself a leader? How do you define “leader” and “leadership?”
5. When did you first decide to pursue leadership? Why?
6. Do you feel your leadership has evolved or changed over time? How?
7. If you were to put a label on your form of leadership, what would it be & why?

**Conclusion:** Thank you for taking the time to be interviewed & thank you for your willingness to be open & candid regarding some of your personal experiences. I will take this information and analyze along with the other interviews that I will be conducting to hopefully draw some conclusions regarding leadership development. I want to assure you again that your responses will be kept confidential & I will not use real names in my report. If you would like a copy of the final conclusions I would be more than happy to provide that for you. Do you have any questions for me at this time? Again, thank you so much.